

By the Rivers Dark by runrarebit

Series: [Altered Trajectory \[5\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Ableism, Ableist Language, Angst, As Max said in Bird on the Wire, Bad Decisions, Billy gets jealous, Billy has issues with masculine authority, Billy only likes a very select few people, Billy's issues with men, Billy's main superpower is denial even with the whole monster thing, Billy's unrecognised feelings getting in the way of people realising how awesome Robin is, Blasphemy, Child Abuse, Communication Failure, Did I mention horrible family members, Domestic Violence, Dyslexic Steve Harrington, Failure to notice the obvious in more ways than one, Fucking Neil Hargrove, Homophobic Language, I mean it, I want to put something here but it would be spoilers, I'm trying not to get too ahead of myself this time, Lack of Communication, M/M, Max assuming Steve having a girlfriend is going to make Billy annoying so not being cool with it, Max is a wakeup to you Billy, Mike is a mess, Monumentally slow burn I am so sorry but we are getting there, Multi, Parental failure, People assuming Robin is Steve's girlfriend, Pining, Probably best to make sure all your Billys are accounted for, Robin is too, Secrets, Sexist Language, Slow Burn, Steve Cooks, Steve and Robin are BFFs, Steve failing to acknowledge the obvious in different ways to Billy, Steve's creepy weird gross pool, Steve's horrible family members, Summary may change, Terrible Parents, There's the whole monster thing, Thoroughly aware bisexual Steve Harrington, Tommy H.'s continued homophobic freakout, Trust Issues, Underage Drinking, Voluntelling, You should always expect to be trapped in a secret Russian base, bad hetero sex, because in more ways than one, emotional/psychological child abuse, internalized ableism, just offensive language in general, mentions of cronenbergian monstrosities, obviously bisexual Billy Hargrove, ok yeah powers, so much smoking, steve has a crush, tags will change, though I am looking at you here Billy

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove/background female characters (briefly), Carol/Tommy H./Steve Harrington(Past), mentions of Will having a crush on Mike

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Summary:

Billy based sequel to [Bird on the Wire](#).

So Billy survived and now everything's- Well, he has no idea what'll happen next. But it's all good, isn't it? It's all behind him. He can move on- even with the weird marks on his body and his damaged car- At least for the latter there's a newly unemployed Steve Harrington hanging around, wanting to be helpful, and willing to drive him where he needs to go.

PLEASE READ AUTHOR'S NOTE OF CHAPTER 42/43

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

TRIGGER WARNING: For homophobic/sexist/ableist language and references to child abuse and domestic violence as well as unsafe driving and body horror. As always please tell me if I miss any.

I am so tired right now but I really want to get this first part out now, while I have the time, so I am doing my best to remain coherent. Thank you all so much for reading the other fics in the series and letting me know you wouldn't mind reading more- so here's the more. The start of it anyway. Aiming to get the next bit out next weekend- I'll be a bit busy through October to the start of November so might not be able to find the time to write as much/post as often/reply as soon as I'd like, but I'm hoping you'll all put up with it.

He sleeps like the dead the moment his body touches the mattress.

The next thing he's aware of is Max bellowing at him to wake up, which he does, and then him blinking up at the ceiling, trying to get his eyes to adjust to the bleary morning light as she's saying *Susan just left without giving her breakfast, **again**, and she's **hungry** and she wanted to make sure he wasn't dead since he slept for **like twenty-four hours**.*

'I know there's cereal Maxine,' he tells her.

'Yeah there's cereal,' is her reply as she stands over him and peers down at him like a little *creep*, 'but there's no *milk*— and I'm not trying it with orange juice again. It's fucking *gross*.'

He sits up, making her step backwards. 'What do you mean there's no milk? Why the fuck is there no milk?'

'I don't know,' she whines. 'I guess no one bought any, or any, like,

bread, or more waffles, while we were, you know—' she frowns, face falling, obviously *remembering*.

'Fine, yes, ok,' he sighs, wanting to get that look off her face. 'We will go get some milk and shit. *But*, I'm having a shower first.' About all he could manage the morning before on his way to bed was stripping his jeans off. It's been— *fuck*. Way too long since he bathed.

He's not even going to *think* about his hair.

'You are pretty gross,' she says with an authoritative nod. Yeah, well, apparently even *pretty gross* Harrington thinks he smells good—

'Billy, you ok?' she says, peering at him, 'Have you malfunctioned or something?'

'Fuck off Max,' he says, shaking himself out of— whatever that was.

'Don't be a dick,' is her response as she flounces out of his room. 'And hurry up! Unless you *want* to be drinking *black coffee*?'

'There's nothing wrong with black coffee,' he grumbles, except, of course, he hates the way it tastes. And he fucking *dares* anyone to call him a pussy because of that.

He feels— actually, physically he feels absolutely *fine*. He feels *good*. He feels like he could go for a twenty-mile run and then surf all afternoon without breaking a sweat— if there was somewhere to surf. Which there's not. Because fucking *Hawkins Indiana*.

Almost bouncing on the balls of his feet he grabs a pair of briefs and his towel and pads to the bathroom, stripping only once the door's shut. When he has his own place he's going to wander around naked whenever he wants without worrying he'll flash his dick at her or Susan or, heaven fucking forbid, *Neil*.

Today is going to be a good day. He just knows it. Evil defeated, still alive, his dad hardly home— fuck. He should ring the pool, see if he still has a job— *later*. Feed Max first.

Fuck does he feel *good*. It's like waking up after the first proper night's sleep in *months*. As he reaches into the shower to turn it on he

freezes, eyes catching on— ‘*Shit!*’ he hisses, stepping back into the light of the window and staring down at himself.

In the light his skin doesn’t look right. There’s faint, silvery lines in places there shouldn’t be faint, silvery lines. Like scars. Real *old* scars, and faded even beyond what old scars fade into, faded so much he doesn’t think it’d be that noticeable unless the person looking knows what he looks like and knows he doesn’t look like *that*— except where he was shot— and on his ankle, where he was first *grabbed*. There the scar tissue— or whatever it is— is much, *much* more obvious, the rest of it— It might be faint but it’s *everywhere*. He looks in the mirror and he can see it there, on his *face*. Irregular and swirling and marbled and like—

All of a sudden he remembers coming *apart*. Body shifting, morphing, swirling out of his *his* shape—

He gags, skin flushing hot for a second before suddenly he’s cold and shaky and not sure if he’s about to puke or faint.

He can’t prove it, but he thinks those lines are where his body *put itself back together*.

‘Billy!’ Max’s voice drags him back to the here and now, ‘Stop jacking off to your own reflection and have a shower! I’m *hungry*.’

What’s he going to do now? Just, like, wear a long-sleeved shirt forever? How fucking *lame*. He yelps out a laugh. *Fuck*.

Fuck it. He’ll worry about it *later*.

He’s got more important things to worry about anyway. Because he might feel fine but he looks like *shit*, and there’s no way he’s leaving the house until he at least fixes his *hair*.

In the shower he scrubs himself quickly, taking no pleasure in the warm water and getting clean. A kind of nausea is clinging to him, making him jumpy, making his hands twitch away from his own flesh. There’s even a marbled little swirl of silver across his *dick*. Fuck. Fucking *yuck*. Did his *dick* come apart last night? How the fuck’s a guy supposed to deal with *that*?

Surprisingly he feels a bit better once he's dry and dressed— but maybe that's just the familiar fire of irritation rising at Maxine's fucking *nagging* that he hurry up when he's trying to get his hair to lay right. 'I swear to God Max, if you don't quit it you are going to *regret it* the next time you're trying to make yourself pretty for fucking *Sinclair!*' he ends up snarling, which makes her snarl back about not needing to get *pretty* for Lucas because he's smart enough to know how good he's got it. 'Doesn't stop you trying on everything in your closet twice over though, does it?' he points out after finally spraying his curls in place. Yeah. He looks good. A bit— *off*— but *good*.

'That's *rich*—' she begins, following him out of the house, before they both just *stop*. Oh. Yeah, that's right. Well, at least the military must have towed his car here while he was sleeping. 'Jesus *Christ*, what did you *do*?' she bleats, staring at his poor baby.

'Something seriously fucking stupid,' are the words he finds slipping out. 'Oh my fucking *God*, I could have broken Harrington's *neck*.'

'*Steve*?' she bleats, whipping her head around to stare at him. 'What did you do to Steve? If you *hurt* him—'

'I didn't fucking *hurt* Harrington,' he snarls, feeling oddly *wounded*. 'It's just—' his eyes go back to the damage, the way the front of his baby is crumpled in. 'He was in the car when I hit the mini Mind Flayer lurking around outside the mall. That's *all*.'

'That better be *all*,' she mutters. 'Anyway, I'll go call him—'

'What?' He snaps, 'to make sure I didn't do anything else to him?'

'No,' she says, meaning *idiot*, 'We need a *ride*— and since the mall's been wrecked he must be out of a job— so—'

'It still *works*,' he points out. 'Fucking *Wheeler* stole it last night, remember?'

She gives him a *look*. 'Are you wanting to get pulled over by Hopper or something? Jealous you didn't get to meet him properly? Because you're more likely to get one of the other ones and El says Hopper

says they're idiots a lot of the time.'

'No I'm—' he shudders. Nope. Now she's just reminded him the Chief of Police wanted to talk to him about how he knows all this stuff that's a danger to the man's *kid*. 'Fine. Whatever. Ring Harrington. We'll get him to drop us off at the garage so I can arrange to get the car fixed—' he doesn't know the garage's number and his dad has taken to keeping the phonebooks in his car for whatever fucked up reason— actually, probably to make it harder for Susan to arrange things behind his back in case she decides to run off like his mom did.

Max snorts out a laugh. 'You do not know him, like, *at all*, do you?'

'What does that mean?' he demands, following her back into the house. '*Maxine*. What does that mean? Fucking *answer*—'

She whirls to face him and gives him a real weird look— kind of *challenging* or whatever— and then says, 'I am going to tell him we need to go get groceries after you get your car sorted out, and he is going to drive us there, and then, I don't know, buy us lunch or something, and then ask us if we need to be driven anywhere else, and then volunteer to drive us even if we could walk or skate or ride our bikes, because underneath all the, whatever, *pretend apathy bullshit*, he is an amazingly helpful loser that likes doing stuff for people and it's easier to go along with it than argue, because arguing makes him get this *look* on his face and is worse than kicking a puppy. So don't be a *dick* to him, ok?'

He doesn't know what to say to that so he just wanders back outside and leaves her to it, taking the opportunity to have a smoke and pop the hood on his baby, to see what damage there is to the engine. Not much. Mainly body work to be done—

He really must get some more cigarettes while he's out—

For a moment the smell of the smoke blends with the smell of Harrington's cologne in his memory and it's like he could just reach out, *take* the lit cigarette the guy is handing to him, the two of them in his car, driving—

‘He said he needs groceries too,’ Max’s voice breaks through, makes him look over at her in time to hear her say, ‘and then said “we’ll be right over”— Who do you think “we” is? I bet it’s Dustin.’

It’s not Dustin. When Harrington’s burgundy beemer rolls up it’s with *Robin* in the passenger seat. ‘Is that the girl that works at Scoops Ahoy?’ Max asks as Harrington is parking. ‘What’s *she* doing here?’ She sounds almost as annoyed as he is to see the girl. Just what he needs, fucking *killjoy* bitching at him about smoking all the fucking time—

‘She was with us in the Russian base, helped crack the code apparently,’ he answers, voice coming out more gruff than he intended. He clears his throat. ‘She’s Harrington’s girlfriend or something.’

‘No way,’ Max says, looking from the beemer to him and back again. ‘No way. Oh my *God*—’ whatever she was about to say gets bitten off as Harrington rolls down his window.

‘Do you two want to hop in the back?’ the guy asks. ‘Garage first?’

‘Yeah,’ he replies, flicking the cigarette butt into the gutter and opening the door for Max to climb in first so he’s sitting behind Harrington. Inside he gets a better look at the guy’s face and sucks in a breath at the way the bruises are darkening. ‘Your face looks like shit— *ow*. Fucking *what* Max?’ he snaps as she elbows him viciously in the ribs.

‘Don’t be a *dick*,’ she hisses viciously, then, louder, ‘Hi, I’m *Max*,’ to Robin, sounding surprisingly *hostile*. He glances at her, surprised. Just because he doesn’t like the girl much— funny, he would have thought Max would think a weird chick like her was pretty cool.

‘Robin,’ she replies, and he sees her glance nervously at Harrington and sees the way the guy frowns. If the brunet is going to give them shit just because neither of them like his lame girlfriend—

He feels a sudden surge of affection for Max.

Because he’s trying to be good or something, or at least not a *dick*, he

doesn't light another cigarette. Harrington's doing them a favour after all, and the guy could just as easily chuck him out of the car if he pisses off the guy's girlfriend.

Still feels weird that Harrington has a girlfriend. Guy's been existing in a state of about-to-be-dumped->dumped->single ever since he met him. It seems kind of— *unnatural*.

He watches Harrington's hands on the wheel as the guy pulls away from the kerb and heads towards the garage. He's a better driver than he would have thought, calm, confident— *safe*. Still, he's never liked being driven by someone else. It always feels best when it's *his* hands on the wheel. He put up with it when he was teaching Max, because she might argue with him, but he knows she knows better than to do something stupid and get them both killed, but anyone *else*—

Not just because he can remember his parents having some pretty fucking *nasty* fights in the car. His dad behind the wheel, car veering all over the road, no one's eyes but his up ahead, and the times when the old man would suddenly lash out, smack his mom *hard* across the face, and all he could think was they were all about to die and his mom crying and bleeding and snarling at the man who had just hurt her would be the last thing he ever saw—

He sucks in a breath, bringing with it the scent of Harrington's cologne. Yeah. Ok. It's ok. It's Harrington. The guy hardly has the balls to drive like a lunatic—

Anyway, fucking *Neil* aside, he's not sure he likes this. It'd be better if he was driving, Harrington in the passenger seat, and Max— *Robin* too, if that's the way it had to be— in the back. Cigarette between his lips of course.

Harrington makes small talk while he drives, chattering on about nothing much in particular. After a while he starts to sound kind of — *strained*. But that may just be because no one is responding that much. Even Robin is staring out the passenger window like she wishes she was somewhere else.

Why though? Shouldn't she be happy? She's safe. They're all safe—and she gets to hang around with her boyfriend with no one

expecting them to wear stupid outfits or sling ice-cream. Kind of *ungrateful* if you ask him, especially since Harrington's trying so hard.

'What groceries do you need?' he asks, interrupting the nervous flow of bullshit from between Harrington's lips. That's a safe topic, isn't it? That's not being a *dick*.

This redirects— but doesn't stop— the bullshit, which wasn't quite what he was after, but— 'I wonder if the supermarket will even be open,' Max muses from next to him. 'Oh my God. I wonder if we'll be in *trouble*—'

'What are you talking about?' he demands, and then remembers hunting them to it, the puddle of El's blood— He shivers in the heat of the car.

'We kind of broke into it last night—' she winces. 'I hope Hopper isn't mad.'

'Why don't you fill us in on what we missed?' Harrington suggests, 'While we were, you know, fighting *Russians*.'

'Getting captured, beaten, and then *running away* from Russians you mean?' Robin says with a fond smirk at Harrington, 'Not to mention —' she trails off, her eyes meeting his in the rear-view mirror. Was she about to say *shot*? He glares, hoping she can read the words "You're not fucking Max up with that shit" in his gaze.

'I fought one,' Harrington points out. 'I even *won*. Also Billy—' he trails off too. For *fuck's sake*. The brunet clears his throat, 'And if I'm remembering right Billy dealt with that mad doctor, so—'

'Ok, you're right, Russians were fought,' the girl says.

'We fought Russians too,' Max pipes up. 'Or, you know, *Russian*.' She then starts telling them what happened to the kids while he was gone.

Pretty much no surprises. Swap out him for the Russian, add a few extra uses of El's powers when she was looking for him and Steve, subtract the time he *reached* for her in that other place, trapped and terrified her, told her *why*, and replace it with the Mind Flayer using

the Russian's ability to track people to follow them back to Hopper's cabin and there you have it. Stupidity at its finest.

He told El to *rest*. He *told her*—

Though of course she wasn't going to with everyone relying on her. At least Max seems a little— *something* about their reckless use of her friend's powers.

He's going to have to have a *talk* with Wheeler and Byers Sr. It seems they were the closest thing to a “responsible adult” hanging around the moment he was out of the picture, and to him it doesn't seem like they were living up to the title.

Poor kid. He'll have to take her for waffles or something. *Just her*, the others don't deserve being rewarded for being a bunch of little shitbrains.

Though maybe Harrington or someone should come too, because it might seem kinda *weird* if he's taking some kid he's not even related to out for breakfast— though maybe Harrington *and* him wouldn't look good either. Two older guys and a fourteen-year-old girl. Yeah, ok, *Max* can come too. But she's not getting a milkshake.

He just knows there's going to be trouble when Harrington pulls up outside the garage. The guy there— older guy, beer belly beneath his stained t-shirt, sneer showing teeth yellow from smoke and coffee— seems to take one look at him and decide he's some dumb, sack of shit kid, that's probably wrecked his car speeding into something.

He feels himself tense up, head going up— He bets the guy is going to try and charge him more than the work's worth, will try and convince him there's more wrong with his baby than there is— if this old bastard thinks he can pull one over on him—

'*Oh Jesus*,' he hears Max whisper and wonders if she's agreeing with him about this old guy.

Yeah, Things aren't going well. Even just arranging for the car to be towed to the garage so the guy can have a look at her and he can feel the judgement radiating towards him in waves. Also it's Hawkins

Indiana, there's no reason it has to be later in the day or tomorrow—who the fuck else needs their car towed?— *and*—

He is going to lose his temper.

A warm, pleasant smelling presence gently nudges him back with a hand planted on his chest. 'Hi, Mr. Duvall.'

'Steve Harrington!' the old guy says, a smile cracking across his unfriendly face. 'You taking care of that beauty of a BWM?'

'Of course, Sir.' the brunet replies. A bit of meaningless small talk ensues, boring, but it's interesting to watch the way Harrington winds this old bastard around his little finger, makes him soften up, that hard, judgemental edge smoothing away.

Before he even realises what's happening Harrington is pushing him back away from the garage, *gentle, so very gentle*, and saying something like, 'Why don't you go get some cigarettes? I'll deal with this. I *promise* I'll get it sorted out, ok?'

And, for whatever stupid fucking reason, he agrees, taking out a smoke and puffing at it while he stalks past Robin and Max lurking near the beemer and down the street towards the 7-11.

He buys a carton of Marlboros from the indifferent girl behind the counter. She's hot enough to warrant one of his more charming smiles and leaning over to flirt with her for a bit— not that she seems to notice— but he doesn't linger that long. He feels like he should get back to Harrington.

When he saunters back the old guy seems a hell of a lot friendlier. 'Steve here told me you were at Starcourt last night,' the man says as he approaches, 'Brave thing you did, young man, getting your sister out like that.'

What?

The brunet's expression is pretty much screaming *play along*— Has Harrington been talking him up this old man? *Why?* Whatever the reason it's not too much of a lie, so he shrugs, 'Yeah, well—' all noncommittal.

Anyway, turns out Harrington has arranged to have his car towed later that day and fixed as soon as possible, whenever whatever parts that need ordering in arrive if it's more than a panel beating job. The old man, Mr. Duvall, will ring him later, once he's had a look at the car, but the prices that get mentioned are a hell of a lot cheaper than he expected, so there's that. They even shake on it, him and the old man. *Weird*. Old guys generally don't like him much.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For the usual homophobic/misogynistic language, and this time for oblique mentions of what could be interpreted as child sexual abuse- but in the past and not happening to anyone in Hawkins- as always please let me know if I've missed any.

I don't have long right now to get this posted so if the chapter notes are a bit rushed I hope you'll forgive me. Here we go, another chapter- in which Max very carefully has to *not* say a bunch of things she thinks. Poor Max. She is not stupid. Thank you all for the comments and kudos on the first chapter, and for reading it, and I hope you all enjoy this one too!

When they're all back in the car Harrington turns and looks back at them and suggests 'Breakfast? I feel like coffee, does anyone else want coffee?— then we can go to the Big Buy.'

He's about to say something about not needing any fucking *coffee*, but then he remembers what Max said earlier and a glance at her tells him she's about to elbow him viciously again if he doesn't play along. 'Yeah, coffee sounds good.' Which it does, actually.

Harrington drives them all to the diner where he took Max and El— Harrington and Robin sitting on one side of the booth, him and Max on the other— which prompts Max into a round of nagging for waffles and a milkshake and a bunch of chatter about coming back here soon with El. Robin decides on waffles too— in a way that suggests to him that she might be trying to get on Max's good side or something. He's just going to have a coffee, but then Harrington is chattering away about the pancakes they make here and makes them sound so good he ends up ordering a plate too.

He doesn't get it. He knows— he *remembers*— that he doesn't get on with the brunet, but somehow the guy is just making everything so— *easy* today.

Harrington's— actually, he thinks maybe Harrington really is a good guy. A bit— *cold? Aloof? **Something*** sometimes, but actually a good guy. Seems to have warmed up real nice to him now.

It's kind of— Fuck, his thoughts feel scattered. Strange. But it's almost *sweet*, or something stupid and faggy like that, watching the way the guy is chattering to Max and Robin, trying to include them both, encourage them, asking Max about shit even *he* doesn't know about.

The coffee's the same as last time, good, and the pancakes are nice and light and fluffy and all that, but his stomach sours as he watches Robin steal a bite from Harrington's plate with easy familiarity. He has no idea why that girl annoys him like she does, but she seems to annoy Max too, because his step-sister makes this quiet little grunting *growl* in the base of her throat as Harrington smiles at the chick.

Does Max have a crush on Harrington?

A quick glance at her, at the way she's looking at the brunet— No. He doesn't think so. It must just be— *fuck knows*. Robin just rubs the both of them up the wrong way.

'These are good,' the girl in question is saying, 'but oh my God they are *nowhere* near as good as those crepes you made. Jesus Steve, we should get a food cart or something and set up in the middle of town, I swear in an hour we'd make more than we did in a *day* at Scoops.'

'*Crepes?*' Max demands before he gets a chance to. 'What crepes?'

'He makes crepes,' Robin says, pointing a loaded fork at the guy in question. 'Didn't you know he makes crepes?' she looks over at the brunet, 'Didn't you tell any of the weird children that hang around you that you can cook?'

Harrington shrugs a little, a kind of bitter twist coming over his face. 'I haven't really felt like cooking recently—'

She kind of bumps her whole body against the brunet and gives the guy a *look*, soft and intimate and affectionate and the sort of thing *he* doesn't feel like he should be looking at. Harrington smiles back and then looks away, seeming almost *embarrassed*.

Max breaks the sudden, awkward silence. Thank fuck. 'Do you think I could get in on this crepe action?' she says, 'And maybe El. I don't think she's ever even had a crepe.'

'Have *you*?' he asks her. He thinks crepes might be a bit out of Susan's league when it comes to cooking.

Her face kind of scrunches up. 'My aunt Christie made them a few times—' her voice gets smaller and smaller, 'my uncle's second wife — my dad's brother. You know?' She gives them all an awkward little smile. 'They weren't very good. Kind of— *rubbery*.'

'Of course Max,' Harrington says, looking all kinds of sympathetic. 'Any time you and El want to come over— as long as I don't have a job—' the guy sighs. 'I've really got to get another job—' those brown eyes suddenly fix on *him*, '—and of course you can come over for crepes too, if you want?' it's said *nervously*.

The frown he sees flash across Robin's face makes the sense of triumph he feels even sweeter, still, it's not like he's actually going to take the brunet up on that offer. 'Yeah, maybe,' he says with a shrug. Harrington looks away at that, something almost *sad* in his gaze.

After they leave the diner they head to the Big Buy, which is surprisingly open— even if it does have a big piece of cardboard taped over the door. He's not sure how it happens but they split up, Harrington going off with Robin, Max and him strolling the aisles together— him doing his best to reign her in from getting too much junk. It's his money anyway, so he should get last say— not that she seems to agree.

'You'll rot your teeth,' he tells her, putting back two of the three packets of cherry Twizzlers she apparently needs. 'Anyway, thought we were here for breakfast stuff.'

'We just *had* breakfast,' she points out.

‘What? You think Harrington’s going to take us out every morning?’

‘He probably would if we let him—’ she shrugs.

‘Ok, no,’ he stops, grabs her arm when she looks like she’s going to keep going and ignore him. ‘I get you saying he likes being helpful, but *don’t* take advantage of him. He’s a *good guy*— and you gotta know I don’t say stupid shit like that lightly.’

She stares at him for a moment, before blinking rapidly and letting out a weird, bleat of a laugh. ‘Ok, *wow*. Um, yeah—’ she takes a deep breath. ‘I will not take advantage of Steve Harrington who is apparently so good a guy he’s even got *you* acknowledging it—’

He’s not quite sure what to say to that, so he ignores it, just starts off in search of a loaf of bread in case someone wants toast or sandwiches or something.

‘What did happen—?’ she asks after a moment as she scurries to his side, ‘I mean, last night, with you and Steve?— or maybe not just *last night*— since you disappeared when you were going to get him?’

He shrugs. ‘Nothing really. He’s just— I don’t know. I got told a bunch of bullshit about him when we came to town and he wasn’t— I dunno— He’s a good guy Max,’ he feels a frown come over his face, his steps slowing. ‘Why didn’t I see that at first?’

She doesn’t answer for a long minute, and when he turns to look at her she looks as deadly serious as he’s ever seen her. As he watches she bites her lip, seems to be debating whether she should say whatever it is she’s thinking— ‘Come on, spit it out,’ he tells her.

She shrugs, looks away. ‘I don’t think you wanted to, that’s all—’

‘What does that mean?’ he demands.

She bites her lip again, flickering a glance at him before looking away. After a long moment she says, ‘You don’t really get on with other guys most of the time, yeah?’

‘I have friends—’ he defends himself. ‘—*had* at least. Back in Cali—’

‘Yeah but they were either guys you knew since forever or they were —’ she shrugs again, clearly uncomfortable. ‘You remember Jay? I mean, of course you do— but you and him were hardly friends until that thing with his sister when you found out and offered to help him beat up his stepdad—’ she trails off.

The thing is—

Ok. *Fuck*. Yeah, she’s right. He just hopes she doesn’t say anything about how easy it’s been since he came to Hawkins not to even bother *trying* to keep in touch.

He could make a big deal about it, go on about how hard it is to feel *connected* to other people— like there’s this glass wall between him and them that’s been there since the day his mom walked out— but it’s not quite true. Somehow Max has broken through, and El, and— yeah— kinda *Harrington*.

‘You’re not pissed at me?’ she asks, sounding nervous.

‘Nah, kid,’ he sighs. ‘But let’s stop talking about this shit, alright?’

‘Alright,’ she says with a decisive nod. ‘Come on, we need to get some Eggos. Now me and El are friends there’s no way I’m letting Mike hog her for the rest of summer.’

By the time they’re ready to go they’ve got bread, more coffee just in case, milk, more cereal also just in case, way too many boxes of Eggos, eggs, ham, cheese, some tomatoes, some maple flavoured syrup, Max’s Twizzlers, Max’s assortment of other junk she doesn’t really need, and a bunch of bananas in case either of them feels like actually eating a fruit. A *fruit* fruit, not, like, a *tomato* fruit.

He really should ring the pool, make sure he still has a job. Yeah, he’s got some savings, but getting his baby fixed is going to eat into them, and —since it’s not like either Susan or Neil leaves money around for them to feed themselves while they’re off doing whatever it is the two of them are doing when they’re not working— it’s on his shoulders to keep both himself and Max fed.

Since he can see Max just wants to run off and find some more junk

food he starts looking for Harrington to see if the guy's ready to go.

He finds the brunet intently examining a pile of apples, Robin wrapped around him, one of her hands very, very, *very* low on his back— almost on his ass.

He blinks.

From somewhere very far away he hears Max hiss out a breath.

Should he leave them be—? *He should leave them.* Yeah, he should— him and Max could walk home. It's not that far—

Something must attract Robin's attention, because all of a sudden she's turning her head and looking at him, and part of him thinks *huh, that's not the look of a girl feeling up her boyfriend*, because for a split second there's something cruel there, cruel and taunting, but the moment her eyes meet his the expression switches to a thoughtful frown— and that's the moment he realises she wasn't looking at *Harrington* when she was touching him, she was looking *past* him, so his own eyes follow the path hers originally had and he finds himself looking at fucking *Carol*.

She looks— *furious*. Face scrunched and ugly and shoulders up by her ears— in fact she looks about two seconds from stomping over and *smacking* someone.

He frowns at her—

If he had to guess he'd say something else is going on that he doesn't know about.

Confirmed, he'd say, when the sound of something being dropped drags his attention back to Harrington to see the guy just knocked a few apples off the stand and is now scrabbling around picking them up. Without thinking he goes over, squatting down next to the brunet and Robin, reaching for the fruit.

A glance at Harrington's face and he can see something miserable and brittle there, and in the way the guy straightens up and so very *carefully* puts the apples back. A moment later the brunet looks up, looks over to Carol— and *that* is the least welcoming look he's ever

seen on Steve Harrington's face.

Jesus fucking *Christ*, what the fuck did she do to him? She must have done something, not even *he* ever earned a look like that back when he was all but riding the guy's ass in the changing rooms, getting up in his face, giving him shit, even after he *beat him unconscious*—

He glances back at Carol, sees her pale, her lips between her teeth, then catches her gaze, sees something contemplative— before even more *fury*. A moment later a woman he'd guess was her mother starts nagging at her to stop dallying and she looks away as she goes to the woman's side at the checkout.

'The fuck is her problem?' he asks, though he doubts he'll get an honest answer.

'She's a raging bitch,' Robin replies.

Ok. So he was wrong. 'No arguments from me.'

For a moment there he almost likes the girl, but then she gives Harrington another one of those full body nudges and the irritation returns. The guy's a *guy*, no guy needs that much physical affection— especially not where people can *see*. It's like she's cutting his balls off right in front of *everyone*.

After they've each gone through the checkout— where Harrington buys a million-and-one fucking things, *Jesus Christ*— he dumps their bag of stuff in Max's arms and has to help the other guy carry his stuff to the car. Fucking *eggs and flour and milk and cream and fruit and vegetables and dry pasta and*— guy seems to be doing the proper weekly household shopping, not just buying a bunch of stuff for himself. Isn't this Mrs. Harrington's job? Like, woman of the house shit? Who the fuck knows.

Once they've got the beemer loaded up with their combined domestic nonsense he leans against it and pulls out a cigarette, lighting up while ignoring the combined irritated sighs of Max and Robin. 'I'm smoking this here or I'm smoking it in the car,' he tells them, 'but I'm fucking smoking it before I'm going anywhere else, so get the fuck over it.'

With almost mirroring noises of annoyance the two girls climb in the car, slamming both doors. Fucking *women*. A moment later Harrington drifts over, leaning against the car next to him. ‘Can I have one?’

He shrugs, getting the packet back out, ‘Sure.’

For a moment he’s tempted— for some fucking stupid reason— to suggest the guy light up off his, but he fights down the impulse and gets out his lighter, watching the way Harrington’s lashes fan over his cheeks as the guy leans in to light it.

They stand there for a moment in silence, before dark eyes flicker over to him. ‘You doing alright?’ Harrington asks, sounding wary. ‘After, *you know*.’

‘Yeah, I’m fine,’ he says reflexively, but then, for a moment, he *remembers*— and it’s like he can *feel it*. And it’s—

‘I’m not going to tell anyone, ok?’ Harrington says, *whispers* really. ‘And if you ever need to, I don’t know, *talk* about it— I’ll try to help if I can.’

He glances at the guy sees *awkwardness*— but also, he thinks, sees that the brunet actually *means it* and everything he should say, all the ways he should cut the guy down for thinking he’s *weak* like that, a pussy, fucking *broken*, don’t come to mind. All he can do is give Harrington a brief nod. Of course he’s got no intention of taking the guy up on the offer, but—

He flicks his cigarette butt into the gutter. ‘Better get the groceries home before the waffles melt or whatever.’

Harrington nods, scuffing his own out.

The drive back is— *weird* or something? Harrington’s quiet, Robin’s looking worried, Max is looking at *him* like he did something, but he didn’t do something, so she can fuck off, and he can’t help wonder what the brunet is thinking. *Did he do something?* He doesn’t think so — Is Harrington upset with him?

If Harrington’s upset with him over *nothing*—

All thoughts go out of his head when they pull up and he sees the *Chief of fucking **Police*** lurking outside the front door.

‘Hopper?’ Harrington murmurs with a frown.

For a moment he’s tempted to tell the guy to just keep driving.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for oblique references to child abuse, mainly in the context of Billy being unable to deal with male authority figures.

I managed to get this chapter finished, yay! I could ramble on about being tired again, but that's a bit boring, so instead I'm going to wish you all a lovely weekend, and hope you enjoy the fic, and then thank you all for reading and leaving comments and kudos, because it is true that I love getting them and so very true that I really love reading people's reactions to my writing!

He lights up a new cigarette as he gets out of the car and approaches the man, head up, shoulders back, trying to show respect but that he's not just going to let some halfwit pig with fists the size of his head push him around. A moment later he hears car doors opening and then Max is scurrying to his side, Harrington appearing a moment later. 'Hey Hopper!' the brunet calls out, sounding friendly but a bit wary.

The man looks at them for a moment, the weight of his gaze shifting over each of them in turn, before fixing on him. 'You and me need to have a talk.'

The words "fuck off" almost trip off his tongue, but he bites them down in favour of, 'Of course— Sir.'

For whatever reason this makes the guy snort, a small smirk twitching around the corner of his mouth.

'Is this about what Billy knows—?' Harrington begins.

'Just me and him, man to man,' the man interjects, looking at the

brunet then at Max. 'I'm not here for a group therapy session.'

Max starts squawking objections, but it's pretty much fucking *pointless*, so he gestures at her to shut it and then gestures for the cop to follow him into the backyard. If the guy's going to start swinging he'd at least like the room to try and out manoeuvre him. Harrington grabs him as he moves past, leaning in to whisper in his ear. 'Hopper's a good guy,' but it's hardly convincing so he just shrugs the brunet's grip off and marches on while trying to pretend it doesn't feel like he's going to his doom.

Fuck. He hopes the cop can't see the weakness in him.

The *monster*.

Once they're out there, standing on the patchy, shitty grass that he seems to always end up being the one mowing these days, he stops, turns and looks at the Chief. Fuck, the man is *big*. He reminds himself that big or not the guy doesn't look anywhere near as fit as he is, so he should be able to keep out of his grip if shit turns nasty. 'So what do you want to talk about?'

The guy gives him a *look*, then nods as if he's just confirmed something the dick didn't even have the courtesy of *asking*. Pissing him off. This is *pissing him off*. 'Your sister and El told me what you told them, about how you found out about everything, but I want to hear it from *you*.'

He takes a deep breath, takes a moment to remember exactly what he said, and then repeats it while trying to vary the words enough it sounds *real*. That's one of the ways they get you— or at least that's what Josie used to say.

The Chief of Police nods as he talks, doesn't interrupt, doesn't give him *any* signal as to how the man is taking his story. Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck* — no. Don't panic. If he panics he'll fuck up—

When he's done Chief Hopper nods again, more decisively, then gestures at the cigarette burned down to ash between his fingers. 'You got a spare?'

He looks at the thing, face scrunching up, before he flicks it away into the bushes. 'Sure.'

Before taking another one for himself he hands one to the cop, watches the man light up with a cheery little yellow Bic before lighting his own with his Zippo. 'Describe it for me,' the man says on a lung full of smoke, 'The *Upside Down*, or whatever it is the kids call it.'

He does, speaking of the ash or rot or whatever it is falling down in drifts, the darkness, the *wrong* smell to the air, the lifeless feeling of it, the *dread*—

Chief Hopper nods again, flicking ash onto the dirt, then says, seemingly out of nowhere, 'I've heard a lot of things about you, you want to guess how many of them are good?'

'Not really,' he replies, '— *Sir*.'

The man nods again— is that all he's going to fucking *do*? Jesus *fuck* — and then muses, 'Speeds around town like an asshole, treats his sister like shit, *aggressive*, picks fights— and there's the amount of times I've had grown men who really should know better come and bother me because they want something done about you before you get all their daughters pregnant—' a kind of rueful smirk flickers across the guy's face, before it gets very *serious*, 'and Steve. I heard about *that*— not from *him*, before you go thinking it, but word eventually got around to me. You gave him a *concussion*, and not a mild one either—'

Guilt. Always with the fucking *guilt*. He can't say anything, can't defend himself, but the cop's still talking, so he probably isn't expecting him to right now.

'—Now I used to think he was a jackass like his old man, but after getting to know him better— he's a *good kid*. Not the kind of kid that deserves the beating you gave him—' the cop sighs, scrubs a hand over his face, 'So I'm coming here, today, with a lot of *preconceived notions* about the sort of man you are— and a lot of thoughts about whether I want a man like that knowing *anything* that could put my kid in danger—'

Now there's a pause, but words still won't come. He wants to scream that he'll never hurt Harrington again, and even if that was a lie *he'd never hurt El*— but he did, in that other life. He hurt her. He *hunted* her. He almost *killed her*.

The cop seems to be examining him, but he can't meet the man's eyes. Yeah, ok, he's a complete *asshole*, he gets it— and now the *consequences* are coming— But all the man does is fucking *nod* again and keep talking. 'But— the way Max defended you last night and the way both her and Steve looked at me just before, both of them standing either side of you like a pair of pissed off momma bears—' the cop laughs, sudden, and he can't help looking at the man and seeing something softer and weirdly, out of place, *happy* on the man's face. 'Anyway, I'm in too good a mood today to come down on you as hard as you probably deserve, so I'll just say one thing: *Prove me wrong*. Ok?'

What?

'Ok. Good talk,' another *nod* and the guy just saunters out of his yard and leaves him there, feeling kind of *stupid*, calling back over his shoulder as he does so, 'In case you were wondering I sorted everything out about Heather Holloway, so don't worry— you're no longer a suspect.'

The *fuck?* Heather—?

'What does that mean?' he demands, flicking his cigarette off into the yard and chasing after Chief Hopper.

'What did you think everyone was going to think, you showing up with her unconscious and then disappearing?' the man replies as he heads to a fucking *yellow*— Fucking *what?*

TODFTHR?

Harrington has wandered over to this fuck ugly car while they were "talking" and is admiring the stupid looking thing— *of course he is*. He can just imagine the brunet driving around in this yuppie-puppy. All big hair and pastels, fucking—

'I was thinking they'd think that it's fucking *impossible* to find a fucking cop in this fucking town when you fucking *need one*,' he snarls before he realises he's going to do it.

'Ah, there he is,' the Chief says to himself— with what he sincerely fucking hopes is the final fucking *nod*— then climbs into the fucking *TODFTHR* and drives off with nothing more than a 'Stay out of trouble kids.'

'Asshole!' he snarls. 'That guy is a *dick*,' he tells Harrington, feeling himself all flared up, waiting for the brunet to argue so he's got someone to unleash all this rage on—

He deflates.

Fuck. *What is he doing?*

'Is everything alright?' Harrington asks with a worried frown. 'I mean, you're not in trouble or anything, are you?'

'You are being far too *nice* to me,' he hisses. 'It's fucking *freaking me out*—'

The brunet flinches back, expression shuttering off— 'Sorry. Didn't meant to— yeah. I'll just— I'll go.'

He grabs Harrington before the guy can get far. Feeling a nervous quiver in the other's muscles, letting go when Harrington snatches his arm back and *looks at him*— and maybe that's *King Steve*, who knows, because the guy sure as hell looks like he wants to hit him right now.

'Fuck,' he hisses. 'I didn't *mean*— Look, you wanna come in for a coffee or something?'

Harrington blinks at him for a moment. 'I don't— you are sending me some mixed signals here, man.'

He's not sure why he does it. Like, he managed *not to* the night before, so it shouldn't be so hard to just, you know, avoid saying something that makes him feel— Fuck, ok, it makes him feel *vulnerable*, but he's remembering Max telling him not to be a dick and what the Chief of Police said and— 'I *am* sorry I beat you up. *And*

gave you so much shit last year. You didn't do anything to deserve any of it, so— yeah. *Sorry.*'

Harrington stares at him, all *big* brown eyes— then, for some reason, flushes bright *pink*. The guy makes a weird bleating, choking, kind of *snorting* noise, then clears his throat, looks away. 'Um— Wow. *Ok.* Um—' those eyes flick back to him, '*Thank you.* Um. I *appreciate it—* am I making this awkward? I'm making this awkward, aren't I?'

He shrugs, weirdly fascinated and completely confused by the guy's reaction. Like, what the fuck? But Harrington's starting to look a bit worried, so he adds, 'Nah. I think that was pretty much all me— So— *coffee?*'

The brunet looks back behind them to his car, where he can see Robin sitting in the passenger seat, then gives him a little, apologetic smile. 'I should probably get her home,' one coral pink lip disappears between teeth for a moment, '—but, raincheck? Yeah?'

'Yeah—' he clears his throat. 'Raincheck.'

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For mentions of domestic violence, mentions of creeps looking at Max at swimming pools, and underage use of alcohol as a coping mechanism. Please do feel free to tell me if I've missed any.

A short chapter's better than no chapter, right? Ah, I don't know, maybe we'll get to Billy seeing Steve in a swimsuit next time. Thank you all so much, as always, for reading, and the comments and the kudos- you're all wonderful!

He goes back to work the next day— Heather being in the hospital means that without him they'd be down *two* lifeguards, so everyone just seems content to pretend he didn't skip out for a few days. He kind of hates it. He keeps catching the others *looking* at him, whispering— and then there's all the obviously false concern about *Heather* that's really either an excuse to make themselves seem like good people or a chance to gossip. Fuck them. Also fuck them if they can't deal with the fact he wears a shirt all the time now.

The fact that his car is in the shop should make shit difficult for him, but fucking Neil *tells* Susan over dinner that she'll be lending him her car— his dad's stated logic seems to be that the man himself can drop her off at work on his own way in every morning and pick her up at night— but he gets the sense that what the man really is trying to do is deprive her of her ability to go where she wants when she wants to. She doesn't argue though, and what's he supposed to do? It's not worth getting into a fight with his old man over something like that when he knows she won't thank him— especially as it leaves him with a ride.

Still, he can't help but feel kinda sorry for Susan. She's starting to get that real *trapped* look about her.

And it would all be good and it would all be fine and life would just be going on— except he can't *sleep*. Not really. Not since the first night.

It's like he can feel his body start to come apart every time he closes his eyes and it's— *Yeah*. Then if he does manage to fall asleep— Sometimes it's just memories of the last time around. Sometimes it's memories of this time. Sometimes it's just *memories*— hitting Harrington again and again, but this time he doesn't *stop* and *Harrington*—

And sometimes he's trapped in the Upside Down, in this dead and rotten mirror of Hawkins— only the air doesn't hurt his lungs when he breathes in and his flesh is as cold and wrong and dead as the place itself— and the him there knows he's trapped and knows he'll never get free and it's starting to drive him—

So. Yeah. By next Saturday he's feeling—

It doesn't help that his body is *wrong*. And he's not imagining it either. It's not just the faint scars, or whatever they are— Some dumbass kid almost drowned himself at work and he ended up having to dive in to pull the worthless little shit out, and the moment he did— He can still swim. He can still *float*— but—

Somehow he's gained just over forty pounds— at least that's what the scales tell him— except he doesn't look any different. Can't tell if he actually *feels* different, or if it's just the— the—

Worry.

And the thing is— life just goes on. Like nothing ever happened. Except it *did*—

It's fucking with his head. And not just him either—

A couple days in and he and Max were fighting pretty much like they used to, both pissed at everything, both picky about everything, both skating around on the edge of their tempers— and she was really, really, *really* starting to piss him off— but a couple of nights ago, when he couldn't sleep and got sick of staring at his ceiling, he finally

decided a beer (or two or *three* or *four*) was the way to go, he found her sitting on the sofa, in the dark, tears streaming down her face.

He'd joined her there, pulled her against his side, held her while she cried silently, and then, when she was done, she'd told him how she keeps on dreaming about Demodogs and the Mind Flayer and being attacked, being *killed*, or watching El or Wheeler Jr or Sinclair or Harrington or any of them *die* and not being able to help, or seeing *him* die— so he has to tell her he has dreams like that too, even though admitting it out loud makes him feel *weak*— because he doesn't want her to think there's something wrong with her for being upset after everything.

It's happened every night since, though they haven't really talked about it, at least not outside the moment, at least not anything other than her sometimes describing her dreams or him making vague references to his— mainly the ones that feel like *dreams*, not the ones that are him trapped in that cold, dead world feeling like he's going *out of his mind*. Mostly though they sit side by side, pressed together, and sometimes she cries, quietly, because neither of them want to risk fucking *Neil* waking up and losing his shit at them.

It was a bad one last night. He hadn't been sleeping when he'd heard her yelp— a bitten off scream— and by the time he'd been out of bed to go check on her she'd been standing in the hallway outside his room, shaking like a terrified chihuahua. *El* is all she'd say, again and again.

Anyway. She'd been so upset all he could think to do was get a beer down her and sit with her on the couch until the alcohol smoothed things over a bit and she'd drifted off.

So, today they're both a bit quiet, but he feels close to her, like she's family, like she's *blood*. Closer than blood considering his mom and fucking *Neil*— Weird. All the distance that was ever between them seems to have shrunk into nothing— Still doesn't explain why his immediate response to, 'Did you know Steve has a *pool*? Dustin says he won't go in it or let any of us in it because he thinks that's where Barb Holland died or got sucked into the Upside Down or whatever, but that's kind of stupid isn't it? I mean, what a waste of a perfectly good pool. And it's *so hot today*, oh my God. We were all thinking of

going to the pool too— except there's always so many people there and—' blah, blah, blah, etc. etc. etc. is to immediately offer to come check out Harrington's dumb pool in his official capacity as a lifeguard and hang around while they swim to rescue anyone who seems about to drop dead or get trapped in freaky alternate dimensions. And also accuse her of trying to manipulate him into doing so.

To which she responds she misses swimming and also hates creeps looking at her at the public pool even more than *he* does, and he's the one who threatens to rip their eyes out of their skulls if they don't keep them off his stepsister.

She has a point.

'Does Harrington know about this genius plan?' he asks while she's fussing with her hair in the bathroom mirror.

A shrug. 'Dustin told him it was going to happen, so—?'

He sighs. 'I have no idea how he puts up with you shitty kids,' and then it occurs to him, 'and *don't* wear a bikini or something. Don't think I'm not going to threaten to rip the eyes out of *Sinclair's* skull—or any of those other shitty boys you hang around with— just because you don't mind them looking as much as if they were a fifty-year-old creep.'

This prompts a bit of bitching about him being *gross*, but he gets distracted by the realisation he better get ready too.

In the end it's kind of embarrassing but she's the one waiting for him to be done. At first he's thinking he's looking *good*, hair's doing what he wants it to, facial hair's finally at a point where he's happy with it — all he needs is his shorts— but fucking *scars*. Jesus *fuck*. Ok, yeah. Max hasn't seen them, Max doesn't know he got shot, Max will *freak the fuck out*— the rest of the kids might too— maybe not *Squawky*, or Erica if she's there— but what if El sees and goes and tells *Chief Hopper*?

Also there's the other scars and even though only Harrington might know what they are, the guy might also put two and two together

and get *actual monster* and decide his policy of *not telling anyone* might be better put off in favour of calling up the US Military and getting him in all sorts of trouble.

So he's going to have to wear a shirt to Harrington's pool— like a complete loser weirdo. Oh God. What's the guy going to *think*?

He tries on like *every shirt that he owns*, trying to find one that makes him look like not *a complete loser weirdo*— but— *yeah*.

He's about to give up and tell Max he's not fucking going— but then it occurs to him that he's basically been invited-(ish) to act as a lifeguard, so it probably won't look so out of place if he dresses like a lifeguard. A *shirt wearing* lifeguard.

As they leave Max gives him a funny look, but he's *doing his best*, ok?

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For homophobic language and I'm sure something I've missed, so please let me know if you think I should add more.

I've got less than five minutes to get this posted so this may all be a bit rushed. Sorry it took so long to reply to the comments last time, but busy, busy- That doesn't mean I don't appreciate you all though. I do. I appreciate you all so very much! Anyway, thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and kudos! And I hope you enjoy this chapter even though it's, again, a short one.

When they arrive at Harrington's— Jesus fucking *Christ*— big ol' house Squawky lets them in like he fucking *owns the place*, with a casual 'Steve's out the back.'

Robin and Erica are also out the back, apparently, he discovers once he's been led through this fucking yuppie mini-*mansion*, standing side by side and watching Harrington— dressed in jeans and a light blue t-shirt, bruises faded to an ugly yellow-green around the edges— standing by the side of his pool and staring into it with a look of quiet horror.

The two girls do not look impressed. He kind of gets it— pool's nice, real nice, seems a shame that it's being wasted like this— until he leaves Max talking to Squawky and gets closer to the brunet, lighting up as he does.

At first it's just like the weather's turned. The hot, sticky day suddenly feeling cold, the air kind of dead. But then he starts prickling, *itching*— this whole body discomfort in lines across his flesh, swirling lines, lines like— and then the air starts smelling wrong, feeling *wrong*, and as he comes to a stop beside the brunet

and glances down where Harrington is looking for a moment he sees
—

It's dark and wrong and there's a *shape* and—

He blinks. The water is blue and still and—

'*Jesus fucking Christ*, that is horrifying,' slips out before he can stop it.

Harrington glances over to him with big brown eyes, looking surprised, 'Did you see something?'

'Can *you*?' he asks, perturbed.

The brunet frowns, 'Sometimes I think I have, but when I look there's nothing there— I mean, Nancy told me this is where Barb *died*, or whatever— I mean, not here, *exactly*, but in the pool— so I think it's probably just that I know that. But—' those brown eyes go back to the water, wary.

Out of the corner of his eye he sees a flicker of movement, red hair, that purple bikini that he did not want Max wearing— he catches her before she can jump in the pool and starts dragging her away from it. 'What?!' she yelps, 'Billy fuck off. *Let me go!*'

'Nope,' he replies. 'No way—'

She starts squawking something about being allowed to wear a bikini if she wants to, but he bellows over her with, 'No one is getting in Harrington's gross fucking *horrifying* pool, ok? No one. That shit is just fucking *wrong*.'

'What the fuck are you *talking about*?!' she wails. 'Billy! Jesus, stop being a *douchebag*!'

While she's squawking the other kids show up, El— still with a bandage on her leg— the little faggot kid, Sinclair, and Wheeler Jr. All of them stopping and *staring* at the two of them. He sees the assortment of swimsuits. '*Fucking NO!*' he snaps. 'No one is getting in that pool. Jesus, do none of you have any survival instincts?'

'You are being a fucking *psycho*!' Max yelps at him, dragging her arm

free. 'We got you to come so you could convince Steve he was being nuts and now you're being even *nuttier*!'

'I'm not *nuts*,' he hisses, 'have you actually gone anywhere near that pool? It's fucking *wrong*.'

'Are you fucking with me?' she hisses. 'If you're fucking with me—' she stomps over to where he was standing and peers down into the water. He can't help it, instinct making him hover near her to grab her if she even *looks* like she's about to get in the water. 'See, there's nothing wrong—'

'*Mike*,' he hears a quiet voice say. He looks over and it's the little faggot kid— the other kids must have come over when Max did— and the kid's grabbed Wheeler Jr with one hand, the other on the back of his neck, eyes wide and freaked out.

'At least one of you isn't completely fucking *stupid*,' he says as the kids start fussing over the boy. 'See Max, you should try to be more like your little fa—' is as far as he gets before she elbows him *savagely* in the gut, giving him a real nasty *look*, and scurrying over to Will's side. Ok. Yes. Maybe calling the kid a faggot out loud might not have been entirely politic.

'So, no pool?' Harrington says, drifting over to his side as he's surreptitiously rubbing where she got him. The brunet looks kind of smug— but he'd guess it's not about the fact he just got winded when the guy says, 'I *told* them— At least for once I'm not being a *complete* idiot.'

He nods. 'No pool—' Except now there's a bunch of fucking fourteen-year-olds in swimsuits carrying on in Harrington's yard.

Since it's pretty clear that things are going to degenerate into something stupid like trying to investigate/fix/exorcise Harrington's gross pool— and he does not want either Max or El anywhere near this bullshit ever again— it'd be best to distract them. He claps his hands and bellows, 'Ok shitbirds! As your plan was bullshit and Harrington was right all along— you can all apologize to him later by the way, that'd be the *decent* thing to do— and you're all still wearing swimsuits like a bunch of losers we might as well head to the

community pool— just what I wanted, spending time at my place of employment on my day off.’

They stare at him. ‘Chop, chop. It wasn’t a fucking *suggestion*. Split yourselves into two groups, one with Harrington, one with me.’ They just keep staring— ‘What? You think I’m about to let you try and get my sister killed investigating this shit right now? *Think again.*’

They start whispering amongst themselves— but, since they don’t argue, obviously they’re not that interested in starting a rebellion.

Harrington disappears inside for a minute to get his things— since they’re all heading for a pool that isn’t— well, *you know*, and the guy seems to want a chance to swim without worrying he’ll be. *Murdered?* Dragged into some nightmare dimension?

While the guy’s away the kids start splitting themselves into two groups. Or, more accurately, the kids with any opinion about who they want to go with do. And Robin. Robin’s going with Harrington of course. Same with Squawky.

Max is at least sensible enough to know she’s going with him, and he’s happy to see El seems to want to stay with her— but, worryingly, it looks like Sinclair and Wheeler Jr. want to come with the girls— ‘Not you, I don’t like you—’ he says pointing at Sinclair, then Wheeler Jr. ‘or *you*. Ok. You know what, *I’m* deciding who goes with who. Max, El, Erica, little Byers, you’re with me. Robin, Squawky, Sinclair, and *you*, you’re with Harrington.’ He looks at the bitching boys and snorts, ‘You should thank me. If I had to have the three of you in the car with me I think it’d be too hard to resist the fucking temptation to kill us all by driving into a *tree*.’ He hears Wheeler Jr mutter to Max something about him being a *psycho*, but does he even look like he cares?

Once Harrington has re-emerged from his bower they get going, him spending the entire drive to the pool luxuriating in the peace and quiet of his vastly *superior* selection of children. A glance at Erica sitting in the passenger seat— because even the *suggestion* that maybe Max should sit there and she should sit in the back had earned them all a truly majestic *look*— and he nods to himself. Poor Harrington.

They get to the pool and the kids pile out and Harrington sighs, bumps shoulders with Robin, and gives *him* a look like “why did you trap me with all the shittiest children?” before the kids are headed for the water and both the brunet and Robin disappear into the changing rooms.

The chick returns first, wearing this plain, black swimsuit that’s either school issued or— fuck. Who knows. Looks ugly and institutional as fuck. Then—

Fucking Harrington’s swim trunks are the tiniest fucking little oh God Jesus fucking *Christ blue*. Blue. They’re *blue*. Bright fucking sky *blue*.

—

—

—

Fuck.

—

—

Fuck.

—

He shifts, uncomfortable. Wow. There’s a lot of hot chicks out today, huh? He’s starting to chub up. Just look at that bottle blonde he can remember from some of his classes— *what was her fucking name?*— in that tiny, little white bikini. Yeah.

Anyway.

Yeah. Ok. He’s seen Harrington naked before— but put the brunet in that absofuckinglutely *obscene* little pair of shorts and it’s suddenly glaringly obvious that the guy has a swimmer’s physique. Put him in the water— which is where he heads almost as soon as he emerges, since Adam declares it “adult swim”— and it’s glaringly obvious that it’s more than a matter of looks.

That long, lean body cuts through the water with the kind of easy confidence only a *lifetime* of swimming would give. Fuck, *does he surf?* Imagine him in the ocean—

Long lean body all tan from the summer sun, that stupid fucking hair slicked down, saltwater dripping down his neck, a big bright smile on those coral lips—

Someone makes a real fucking *obnoxious* snorting noise right next to him, making him jump. He whirls around to find Robin, but she doesn't look like she said anything and is now giving him a funny look for staring at her. 'You alright there Hargrove?' she asks. 'You're looking a bit red. I've got some sunblock if you need it?'

'Don't need it,' he replies, 'I don't *freckle*,' the "unlike like you" remains unsaid.

'Wow, dick much?' she mutters under her breath as she pads past him and climbs into the pool. She is not the swimmer Harrington is—though he's kind of disappointed to see that she *can* swim— slower, less elegant, less *interesting*— his eyes go back to the lithe figure in blue. *Jesus*.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for homophobic/sexist language, also for perverts looking at underage girls, probably others so let me know if I've missed any.

Yay I got this chapter finished oh my God! Tired again, but things are starting to calm down a bit now so hopefully longer chapters. Thank you so much for the comments and kudos and for being so nice, I really do appreciate it, more than I can say!

Jesus, he is standing by the side of the pool and watching the swimmers and no one is even paying him for it. Since he can't go in without taking his top off— no matter how *seductive* the blue of the water looks on this hot, sticky day— he might as well find somewhere to sit and keep an eye on the kids and anyone who might think it's a stellar idea to perve on his stepsister— or El. Or, fuck, *Erica*—

Someone really should drown perverts like that.

'Why aren't you swimming?' Max demands, coming to stand over him and glare the moment he's actually found somewhere comfortable to sit— though by *find* what he means is tell the kid already sitting there to take a fucking *hike*—

'You have any idea how much piss is in that pool?' he asks, raising a brow and lighting a cigarette. 'Because I don't, but I can *guess*.'

'Ew. *Gross*,' she replies, then saunters off to go talk to El.

He sees, *displeased*, that Sinclair and Wheeler Jr. are lurking nearby, sees that *both* the little shits have the audacity to give Max a once over as she wraps an arm around the other girl's shoulders and leans in to whisper something that makes them both giggle. Fucking *boys*.

Max catches his eye and gives him a warning glare so he rolls his eyes, *if she wants to be perved on by her gross friends*— still. Annoys him.

He has a quick look for the rest of the kids, sees Erica's found some of her friends, sees little Byers hanging around with Squawky— who seems to have been looking at *him*, but who looks away the moment their eyes meet. Then he finds his eyes searching for something less irritating to look at and catches Harrington's form in the water once more.

The only thing that ruins it, makes *irritation* rise, is the shadow of the fading bruises, but he almost can't see them right now. Through the water. With the easy way the guy is swimming.

—

Fuck.

Maybe one day he could suggest they take a road trip— him, Harrington, maybe *Max* if she's being less annoying— all of them drive back to Cali, back to the sea and the surf and all his old haunts

—

It's pretty fucking *faggy* to think a guy looks beautiful, isn't it? Even if it's only the way he swims—

Good fucking thing he doesn't then, yeah?

Eventually the kids are let back in the pool, which prompts Harrington to immediately get back out of it. The brunet looks around for a moment before spotting him, then comes straight over, all slicked down hair and long legs.

'That was so good!' Harrington exclaims, standing over his lounge chair. 'I have *missed* swimming.'

His eyes catch on droplets of pool water as they drip from the ends of that surprisingly long hair and run down the guy's chest.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck—

He stubs out the cigarette and clears his throat. 'I know why you can't swim at home, but why haven't I seen you around here all summer?'

The brunet flops down onto the lounge next to him, abandoned by the friends of the kid he'd chased off the one where he's sitting. A small shrug, 'Didn't think I'd be welcome.'

Guilt again, but a bit softer than usual, because Harrington gives him a rueful smile and he can't read any condemnation in the guy's look. If the brunet has *forgiven* him— fuck. It's more than he deserves. 'Well, any time you want to for the rest of summer—'

'I *wish*,' Harrington laughs, 'but I've got to get another job. Robin and I have been looking—' he trails off. 'Robin!'

The girl, who had been lingering in the pool until the sheer volume of kids had driven her out, heads over, Harrington shifting about on the lounge so she can flop down onto it next to him. She slings an arm over the brunet's shoulder and pulls him close, making Harrington let out a little *oof* sound. 'Good swim, dingus?'

'Good swim,' the guy responds, wrapping one of his own arms around her waist and pulling at her until they unbalance each other and collapse backwards on the lounge in a pile of limbs. 'How about you?'

The girl's giggling too much to answer, which starts Harrington giggling, and then he's staring at the two of them and wondering *what the fuck*, and also feeling real annoyed. Weirdest fucking couple, *ever*.

He looks away, lights another cigarette.

'You sure you don't want some sunblock, Hargrove?' the chick asks as she happily rolls herself until she's lying half over Harrington like— he doesn't even know like *what*. His brain keeps thinking *beached whale*. 'You're looking even redder than before.'

This makes Harrington half sit up and look over at him with concern, 'I've got some aloe back at home if you need it—? I should have

brought it I guess, but I have to be out for ages to burn— usually I just *tan*.'

'Then why do you have aloe?' Robin asks.

A grimace, brown eyes glancing to the side. 'You've seen Tommy, right?'

'He is a real freckly little fuck, isn't he?' he muses, then glances at Robin, 'Worse than you even.'

She glares at him, but not for long, her attention going back to Harrington with a look of— *Why does she look so concerned?* She leans in close and whispers something in the brunet's ear, and then he could swear Harrington whispers back, "It's fine. *I'm fine.*"

The fuck?

He would contemplate asking some questions about now, but he catches sight of Max's red hair out of the corner of his eye and when his eyes focus on her, and El, the two of them heading his way, he can see one of the men here with his wife and his fucking *kids* leering at the girls. He's on his feet before he can think, stomping over to put himself between the girls and the pervert.

'Hey, you old skeez!' he snarls, making the man jump, eyes twitching away from Max's body and meeting his gaze. The man pales. The wife looks over. Behind him he hears *Oh Jesus, here we go*— 'Eyes off my sister's ass if you don't want me to put *this*—' he waves the cigarette at the man, '—out in them.'

The guy tries to argue that he wasn't looking, puffing up and going red, looking even uglier than nature made him. Limp-dick little shit. He's not fucking intimidated, gets up in the guy's face, points out what he saw, calls the man out for what he is, points out that the man is here with his wife and his— now freaking out— *kids*.

This gets the wife in question involved— but, of course, like every other *stupid* woman content to be walked all over she takes her husband's side. 'I know what I saw,' he tells them both with a sneer, and then, 'I'm sorry m'am, you might want to keep your *dog* on a

leash if you're going to take him out in public.' She looks like she's going to hit him, and he'll take it if she does, but it's just making him think less of her.

Adam comes trotting over to try and de-escalate the situation, and at first he thinks the other lifeguard is going to take the couple's side, feels himself start to tense up, *fuck, he needs his job here*, but the guy's handsome face scrunches when he says the man was looking at his *fourteen-year-old* sister and her friend, and then the man and his wife turn their aggressive defensiveness on his dark-haired colleague and somehow, *fuck knows how*, it ends with the couple and their poor kids being kicked out of the pool for the day—

'Fucking pervert,' he hears Adam mutter as the family stalks off all offended. Grey eyes flick over to him, then away. 'I'm probably not supposed to say *thanks* for starting a stink like that Hargrove—' the guy claps him on the back, 'So let's just pretend that's not what this is. Caught the guy looking at my own sister a time or two in the past —' with that Adam walks off, leaving him feeling. Something. Weird. Expectations fucking *subverted*.

Every now and then he catches himself thinking maybe this town isn't so bad— *monsters* aside.

He heads back to his seat, finds Harrington and Robin sitting up on theirs, *watching* him. Finds Max and El standing there too, a frown on El's face, a *look* on Max's. 'I was coming over to offer to buy you a coke or something,' she tells him. 'But then you did *that* again, even though it's embarrassing, so now you have to buy me one. And *El*. And, I dunno, Steve and Robin.'

Harrington starts to say that *it's alright, that he doesn't need Billy to*— so he interrupts, looking at Max, 'Thought you hate *New Coke*?'

She rolls her eyes. 'Then a *Pepsi*.'

'Fine, ok, *whatever*,' he stalks off to fetch her stupid *Pepsi*. A moment later he hears rushing footsteps, looks around to tell whoever it is off for running near the pool, but it's El.

The girl is still dry, no sign of having got into the pool for all she's

wearing a swimsuit. His eyes flick to the bandage around her calf—she probably just didn't want to be left out. 'You doing alright, kid?' he asks as she falls into step beside him.

She thinks for a moment. 'I'm ok—' a pause. He thinks maybe she wants to say something else. 'My powers haven't come back though.'

Oh.

He wishes he could tell her something, *anything*, to reassure her— but if the Mind Flayer knew anything about what had happened to her *he* doesn't, and he has no memories of the time *after*, but— 'Give it time,' he suggests, 'You overdid it, that's all.'

She nods. 'That's what everyone keeps telling me—'

They reach the soda machine and he starts feeding in coins. He can feel it still, the sense she wants to say something else. Eventually she almost mumbles, 'Are you angry with me? You told me to rest and—'

He shakes his head, looking at her as reassuringly as he can. 'I'm not angry with you.'

'Are you sure?' she asks, sounding nervous. 'Because I don't think people always say if they are.'

'Shit was happening and you wanted to protect everyone, right?'

She nods. 'Right.'

'And it's not like there's really anyone else who can, is it? Or find people when they've disappeared—?'

'No,' she shakes her head.

'So, what were you supposed to do? Of course you used your powers —' he sighs, 'I just wish you hadn't had to.' He hands her a Pepsi. 'That one's yours.'

She opens the can and sips it, '*Sweet.*'

'Yep,' he replies, carrying the other cans back to the others. 'Not as

sweet as New Coke though—’

She nods, ‘*Too sweet.*’

He hands over Max’s first, since she starts making *gimme* motions the moment she sees him, then Robin’s, then Harrington’s— fingers brushing against the brunet’s longer ones— then opens his own. The day is really fucking gross. Hot and sticky and—

He flops back onto his lounge, making sure to leave room for Max and El, who sit on the end of it. They’re all having a nice, *peaceful* drink, when the boys show up and start whining about no one buying them a Pepsi. ‘Steve, you’ll lend me the money, won’t you?’ Squawky says, fucking audacious little—

Harrington starts shifting like he’s going to get off the lounge, but Robin pushes him back down, ignoring his protests that he doesn’t mind buying the kids a drink. ‘Hargrove bought them, you want a drink, try asking *him*,’ she suggests.

He gives the little shit a *look* to make sure the kid knows exactly how welcome he is to try it. Squawky gets huffy, which is *annoying*— though nowhere near as annoying as just about *everything* about Wheeler Jr.— but soon enough the girls have finished their drinks and all the kids are going off together to do whatever stupid shit it is they do.

He checks around again to make sure Erica is ok— sees her in the pool with her friends— and sighs. Time for another smoke. He’s lighting up when the blonde from earlier, the one in the *tiny* white bikini, comes sauntering over in that kind of awkwardly *deliberate* way some girls walk when they’re trying to be seductive.

‘Hi Billy,’ she husks as she comes to a stop at the end of his lounge.

‘Hey Chelsea!’ Harrington pipes up from his seat intertwined with Robin.

The girl glances over, raises her brows like she’s just stepped in dogshit and can’t believe it’s happening— ‘Steve,’ she says in a decidedly less purring voice, then turns her attention back to him. ‘I

though it was really *brave* what you did before, standing up for your sister like that,’ she breathes, bending down a little and pushing a pair of truly *magnificent* tits closer together with her upper arms to emphasise her cleavage.

Jesus fucking *Christ*, if it was just the two of them he would *definitely* be getting his dick sucked about now.

She is *hot as fuck*— but he finds himself a little bit annoyed, not sure why. The way she said *Steve*— he glances at the brunet and finds the guy and Robin sitting forward, curled around each other, whispering *furiously*. Harrington seems to be finding something seriously fucking *amusing* from the way he’s trying to hold in giggles, but Robin is *bright red*— ‘*Nine, definitely a nine*—’ he thinks he hears her say. ‘Goddammit Stevie, you were right. *Jesus Christ*.’

Harrington responds with what sounds like, ‘I said a *ten*.’

To which the chick whispers, ‘points off for personality— and *hair*.’

Harrington’s brown eyes flicker over— *Chelsea*? Head to toe, assessing, before lingering on her head. ‘Ok, *yeah*,’ the guy whispers with a nod.

What?

‘So,’ the blonde is purring, ‘Are you doing anything later? There’s a party at Brad Dailey’s— since, you know, Tommy H.’s parents came back and now everyone else is having to pick up the slack. Will you be there?’ she actually bats her eyelashes at him, ‘Because *I* will be.’

Fuck. *Hot* girl is flirting with him and he is not flirting back. He really has *malfunctioned*. He gives her one of his most charming smiles, ‘Then I might see you there, *Chelsea* is it?’

She nods, breathes out, ‘See you then,’ and slinks past, hips swaying. For a moment he’s caught watching her, but as she moves past Harrington and Robin his eyes catch on both their faces, eyes on her perfect ass with just as much intensity as his own just were.

Wait—

WHAT?

A moment later Robin lets out a strangled sound and collapses against Harrington, hiding her face against his neck. Harrington laughs and wraps both arms around her, rocking her back and forth a bit until they're in danger of falling off the lounge. Smiling brown eyes look over at him and the brunet says, 'That girl tries *way* too hard, doesn't she?' while Robin is still muttering to herself in his grasp.

Ok.

Ok.

Um—

Play it cool. 'Chelsea?' he asks, raising a brow.

Harrington nods. 'When we were younger she was actually nerdier than, like, *any* of the kids, but now she's all—'

He nods. 'Fucking *centrefold*, right?'

'Yep,' Harrington sighs, relaxing back on the lounge with Robin still red and hiding her face against his neck. '*Definitely* a nine.'

—

No way.

*No **fucking** way.*

That would be—

—

Huh.

—

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For the usual homophobic/sexist language, probably also for the objectification of women, as well as possibly others. Tell me if I've missed any. Plus CONTENT WARNING: For hetero sex. Admittedly bad hetero sex, but hetero sex nonetheless.

Welcome to part one of Billy's rather wild night. Part two should be done early next week... A reminder, Billy is very good at denial- Anyway, thank you all for reading, and for the comments and kudos! You're all awesome!

He's smoked half a pack of cigarettes by the time the kids get sick of being at the pool— even given one to Harrington when Robin disentangled herself from him long enough to go use the ladies room

He feels weird. Ok, these days he *always* feels weird, but this is a *different* weird. Kind of antsy. A strange kind of energy buzzing in his veins that's different than the energy he's had ever since he woke up post *monster* transformation.

It takes him until he's driven Max home to realise what it is. He's *horny*. Huh. First time since it all went down— means his dick *does* still work not matter what might have happened to it.

Must have been Chelsea and her itsy, bitsy, teenie, weenie, almost *see-though* little white bikini that did it.

Max takes ownership of the shower when they go inside— and knowing her she'll be a *while*— so he decides he might as well jerk off while he's got the house (pretty much) to himself. He goes flicking through his skin mags for a sexy blonde, body as killer as that *Chelsea's*, but like usual his attention keeps getting caught up by brunette beauties with big brown eyes.

Choosing the hottest one he can find— long and lanky and with *gorgeous* legs— he goes to town, spitting into his palm and wrapping it around his dick, trying to get himself off with maximum efficiency.

He looks at the girl, pussy spread for him, tries to imagine he's there with her, between her legs— maybe licking into her. He likes that. Girls like that. It's all good— but it's not working. His dick's hard, he's feeling *good*, but the pleasure's not building to anything—

So he tries imagining Chelsea, pulling that tiny little bikini out of the way, slicking his fingers up where she's all wet, making her moan and squeak and clench up when he pushes the first one in—

Nope. No joy.

What the fuck?

Ok. Ok.

Forget the skin mag, forget Chelsea, just lean back and shut his eyes and imagine whatever it is he's actually after. *Legs*. Yeah. Long, long legs. Brown hair. Brown eyes. A sweet smile just for him. A hole, tight and clenching around his fingers. A mouth to kiss. Thighs wrapped around him. Deep, soft voice *moaning* his name. Wanting it. Wanting *him*. All *his*—

He comes, hard and sudden and strangely *unsatisfying*, and when it's done he's not any less horny than he was before. Not any less antsy. Something fucking *vibrating* under his skin.

He needs to get his dick sucked, that'll fix it.

—

Where the fuck's Brad Dailey's house?

What the fuck is he going to do with Max while he's out of Susan doesn't come back soon? No way is he leaving her here all by herself, and since Chief Hopper's cabin was destroyed this time around too and he has no idea where El and her father are staying, leaving her with the other girl is out of the question. Also, no way is he dropping her on the doorstep of *any* of those shitty boys. Except maybe the

Byers kid— but the Byers house is fucking *awful* so he doesn't really want her there either. Maybe he can leave her with Harrington? Yeah. Harrington is safe. Harrington will look after her—

Turns out he doesn't have to worry because fucking Neil drops Susan off while he's getting ready to go out. 'Your father is having dinner with some colleagues,' she tells him, as if he even cares.

'Sure Susan,' he replies, fussing with his hair— which is still looking fucking *epic* today— before applying the usual date night cologne. *Aramis* this time. Huh. It doesn't smell anywhere near as good as Harrington's scent— he's gotta ask the guy which one it is. It'd be kinda— *weird*. Really. To get some for himself, but he's still *curious*.

Max comes in to gawk at him while he's checking himself out a final time in the mirror. 'You're going out?'

'There's a party at Brad Dailey's house,' he replies, admiring the way the black silk shirt he chose still manages to look cool even though he's got it buttoned almost all the way up.

'Do you even know who Brad Dailey is?' she asks with a knowing look on her face.

'Nope,' he barks out a laugh, 'No fucking clue.'

She rolls her eyes. 'Jessica Dailey is in my grade—'

'Yeah, *and*?'

'*And*— do you want to know their address?'

'Sounds a better idea than just driving around town until I find a party—' which had been his previous plan.

She tells him the address but then keeps lingering in his doorway. 'What?'

A nervous little flicker crosses her face. 'You'll be back, um, *later*. Right? You're not going to stay out all night—?'

He thinks of her nightmares, her leaning against him on the couch,

the times she's sobbed out a confession that it was *him* she was dreaming about. Dying. Disappearing—

'I'll be back before my coach turns into a pumpkin— I *promise* kid.' Huh. His mom used to love Cinderella— He'd forgotten that until just then.

She nods. 'Then have fun— and don't do anything *stupid*.'

Stupid like *what*?

The party is about as interesting as every Hawkins party— not very. A lot of dumb, drunk kids doing dumb, drunk shit. When he'd first arrived in town he'd been so fucking *miserable*, so keen to forget the fact his dad had trapped him out in bumfuck nowhere with no one he knew and a whole bunch of kids that didn't know they had to treat him with *respect* just yet— so he'd been just as dumb as the rest of them. Fucking idiots. A kegstand isn't that fucking *impressive*—

Though with Tommy fucking H. bitching in his ear about how Harrington thought he was better than anyone else just because he could—

Fuck.

That'll teach him for listening to a dumb shit like that.

He gets a beer when he gets in the door and starts to mingle, letting his body move to the surprisingly danceable music. No fucking *disco*, thank fuck.

He keeps an eye out for that specific shade of bleached-to-shit blonde, thinking that Chelsea really was up for it earlier, and she is hot as *shit*. He thinks he's seen her at a few parties before, but she was always with a guy at the time and he was never picky. Out for a good time, not trying to bag the best looking broad in the place.

He spots Carol before he does Chelsea and frowns. She is *drunk*, he can tell already, drunk and hanging off a couple potato-faced guys he vaguely remembers from the basketball team— no Tommy H. in sight.

When she sees him she actually sticks her middle finger up at him before wrapping her arms around potato-face 01's shoulders and pulling him down for a kiss.

Ok. Whatever.

By the time he finds Chelsea he's considering taking one or two other girls up on the offers he sees in their eyes, in the way they say his name, in the way they lean into him. Being *wanted* is a powerful thing— but the smell of smoke and something sweet and chlorine and sunblock and tanning oil seems trapped in his nose, the memory of long legs, white teeth bared in a smile—

Yeah. It's *Chelsea* his body wants.

When he does find her, leaning against a windowsill in the lounge, staring out at kids doing dumb shit by the keg in the backyard, a red cup in her hand, he thinks yes. 'Hey,' he says, leaning against the wall next to her.

She smiles, wide and happy, before she can catch it and turn it into something a bit more *seductive*. And that's pretty much that. A tiny bit more small talk and she's leading him through the house to a moonlit bedroom, pushing him back on the bed, stripping out of her short little dress and pulling open his jeans so she can—

Give him the worst head he thinks he's ever had in his life. Jesus fucking *Christ*.

Awkward and toothfilled and she keeps making these *choking* noises, and not *hot* choking noises, choking noises like she's about to puke in his lap, and there's tears running down her face and smudging her mascara, and the way she's holding her body tells him she's enjoying this about as much as he is and his dick's not even all the way *hard*. Worst is that all her gagging is making the image of it splitting apart along the scars into some fucking *tentacle* and *choking her to death* keep flashing across his mind, so that's definitely *not fucking helping*.

'Ok, ok,' he says, grabbing at her shoulders and tugging at her until she finally gives up his dick like a dog fighting to keep a bone. 'Let's try something else.'

She starts apologizing and then *bursts into tears*— Oh God— and in the resultant babbling he thinks she's going on about knowing she's terrible at it and that she has a sensitive throat and she always feels like she's going to choke, so then he has to try and reassure her and—

Fuck. Ok.

So— since he's not in the mood for the full fuck right this moment, for arms and legs around him and all that full body *contact* which sometimes makes him feel kind of *trapped*— and definitely not after her *crying* and him worrying his dick's about to savagely *misbehave*— he offers to eat her out, which makes her start on about how most guys won't— which he doesn't get and never has— and then about how the last guy who did was "*Steve*."

He pulls back to look at her, 'Wait, *Harrington*?'

She nods. 'We, *you know*—' no he does not *know*, '—a few times, but he's *too big*, and he wouldn't fit, so instead he'd *do that* and then I'd use my hand on him.'

Why the fuck did she just tell him that? Oh God. Oh *fuck*.

Um.

—

Wow. Yeah, she is really hot, isn't she? *Sexy*—

Yeah.

A pause and then she says, 'Are you two friends now? He was with you at the pool earlier—'

'Yeah,' he replies, hoping it's true.

She frowns for a moment, then nods. 'I should probably apologize to him then.'

Ok, that makes *no sense*. 'Why?' he demands.

She shrugs, making her magnificent tits wobble distractingly. 'I don't

know. Like, all of a sudden Tommy H. and Carol weren't his friends anymore and everyone just decided he was a *loser*— I mean, we all thought he must have done *something*. Like, hit on Carol maybe?— but if *you're* his friend, then maybe he *isn't* a loser, or, like, a *bad person*. Which would be good, because I've always liked him—'

Wow. Ok. Hot but *shallow*.

'Harrington's a *good guy*,' he tells her. 'A better guy than Tommy fucking *H*.'

She seems to think about that for a moment, then nods. 'Ok—' a teasing little smile comes onto her face and she reaches for him, running her fingers through his hair and tugging gently on a curl, 'So, do you want to do it like I did it with him?'

An odd kind of heat runs through him at the thought— but before he kisses his way down her body to bury his face in the bush of brown curls between her legs, he just checks she doesn't think this is anything more than it is— a bit of *fun*. The way she seems to care about his opinion so much is making him *worry*.

Reassured by her response he gets to work, feeling her start to come apart quickly under his tongue. She tastes good, she's *responsive*, and it's *hot*. Exciting. His dick's all the way hard now, throbbing, dripping precum onto the sheets of whoever's bed this is.

In the warm shelter of her thighs he wonders if he does it like Harrington, if he moves his lips, his tongue like the brunet, if he uses his hands the way the other guy does—

She claws at him when she comes, fake nails catching at his scalp and the back of his neck, making him cringe and have to fight down the urge to fight her off, definitely dragging him out of the moment. He pulls away, wiping his spit and her slick from his face with a hand that he then wipes across the sheets.

Chelsea lies there all spreadeagled like a dead frog for a moment, panting in deep breaths and shaking every now and then with aftershocks. He looks at her, thinks that she's still *hot*, but his interest is definitely waning.

Maybe he should go find some other girl to suck his dick?

Maybe he should have just stayed home? Watching shitty TV with Max would have to be better than this.

A moment later she breathes out, 'Let me—' and spits on her hand before reaching for his dick. It firms back up under her confident strokes, but other than the physicality of it this is *not* a sexy moment. She's still lying there making no attempt to do anything other than stroke him off. She's not playing with his balls, not trying to kiss him, not kissing his neck, not bringing those perfect tits up where he can bury his face in them, not even trying to look sexy for him. Just jacking him like his dick's a candlestick and she's a bored maid trying to polish it as quickly as she can.

Fuck.

—

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For homophobic language, homophobia, sexist language, ableist language, slut-shaming language, Tommy H being Tommy H, violence, explicit child abuse, Neil being fucking Neil- if I missed any please let me know.

So, welcome to the violence portion of Billy's wild evening, to go with the sex portion last time...

By the way this universe is pretty much entirely AU now, and also based entirely on the show and not anything else- just letting you know. Also tags might be getting updated soon. Parts of the plot are coalescing nicely in my head.

Thank you all for reading the fic- and hopefully humouring the levels of self-indulgence it might collapse into- I'm so very grateful!

Later he goes outside to smoke and ignore the bellowing bullshit of the boys over by the keg and wonder what the fuck he's doing with his life. That was not—

Anyway. He's unsatisfied, still antsy, now feeling kind of grimy—even though he washed his face and hands after leaving Chelsea in the bedroom while she was pulling that little dress back on.

Not the best night he's ever had.

He also feels weirdly guilty, though he has no idea *why*. Like he's done something he shouldn't have, like he'll get in *trouble* if it gets found out.

What he needs is a *drink*.

He flicks his cigarette butt out into the garden and saunters over to the keg— Huh. There's Tommy H.— just as Caroleless and she had been Tommyless earlier.

The guy looks completely fucking *wasted*— No, not just wasted, fucking *sick* or something. Shadows under his glassy, red-rimmed eyes, paler even than usual aside from the flush of the alcohol, hair not just a mess but a fucking *greasy* mess— And he's laughing like the world's ending, flailing around with no coordination as he bounces off the other guys by the keg, pushing them out of the way so he can drink straight from the tap without even attempting a keg stand.

'He and Sheryl broken up or something?' he asks one of the other, vaguely familiar, guys. Todd or Ted or Thadd or Chad or something.

Tommy looks up at the sound of his voice and he has a second to think, *oh shit*, before the guy is lunging at him. 'What the fuck is your problem!' he roars as he dodges, and again, as somehow Tommy catches himself before he falls over and comes bouncing back, lunging at him again.

Instead of answering Tommy lets out a snarl of mindless fury and keeps coming, pushing him, trying to knock him over. It's easy, *too easy*, to keep his feet, but somehow he still finds himself losing ground under the assault, the dark haired guy pushing the two of them away from the house and out into the darkness at the end of the backyard.

Ok. This is *pissing* him off, and you know what? In the absence of a good fuck a *fight* will do. He pushes back the next time Tommy lunges at him, 'You're being a fucking *retard*!'

Tommy's snarl of fury gets a shriller edge to it, before the guy finally starts forming actual *words*. Except the words make no sense since they are, 'Carol *saw you*!' and then an attempt at a punch.

'Carol saw me *what*, you sack of shit?!'

'You think I don't know? *We* don't know? *We know*,' the guy babbles, between attempts to hit him. 'I bet he's just *gagging for it* too. Fucking *cocksucking* little *slut*. We've all seen your dick Hargrove, it's not *that*

big. I bet you leave him *unsatisfied*. I bet he's out there on his knees for psycho Byers the moment you turn your back— that's probably why that *cunt* Wheeler dumped him. She probably got sick of sharing the guy she'd rather have with—'

There are thoughts. He can feel the edge of them, but they don't get any clearer. All he knows is he's getting fucking *furious*. He catches the guy on one uncoordinated lunge and shakes him, hissing out, 'Explain what the fuck crawled up your ass and died.'

Tommy laughs, sounding completely fucking *deranged*. 'What, like you crawled up Stevie's? Don't get too fucking *attached*. He's *easy*, you know. He'll be on his knees for some other dumb fuck with a bigger cock the moment you've got your back turned.'

—

The next thing he's aware of is being dragged off Tommy by a pack of potato-faced jocks. He can feel his body struggling, trying fight them off so he can go back to trying to beat the dark-haired guy's face all the way through his fucking skull. '*Jesus* he's strong,' he hears someone say.

He almost gets free, but then someone's got him by the hair and is *dragging* him away, and no matter how much he flails and tries to hit the guys with their hands on him and claws at the ground he finds himself going.

Through a forest of chattering people he sees glimpses of Tommy on the ground, face a mess of blood and bruises— and a surge of *disappointment* flows through him as he sees the guy move, hears him groan, sees Carol push her way through the crowd and help her boyfriend sit up.

The crowd closes around the pair as he'd dragged back over to where the keg is and almost *thrown* into a lawn chair. When he tries to get up and go back after Tommy one of the potato-faces pushes him back down, then hands him a beer. 'Look man, I have no idea what that was about and we all know *he* started it, but I'd appreciate you not trying to kill someone in my backyard. Ok?'

‘He’s a fucking *asshole*,’ he snarls, taking a deep swig from the bottle.

‘No argument from me,’ the guy—*Brad Dailey*?— says, ‘Still think that might have been a bit of an overreaction though.’

‘He fucking *deserved it*,’ he hisses as he fishes out his cigarettes, wincing at the pain in his raw knuckles.

‘You wanna tell me what he did?’ the guy asks, accepting a cigarette when he offers.

He lights them both then sits back in the chair, inhaling deep and exhaling ‘Nope,’ on a cloud of smoke.

‘Fair enough,’ the guys says, glancing down the end of the yard where Carol and a couple other guys are helping Tommy to his feet. ‘Just tell me if it’s the kind of thing that means I shouldn’t be inviting him around anymore.’

‘You shouldn’t invite him around anymore because he’s a *fucking loser*,’ he snaps.

‘But he didn’t do anything to one of the girls or anything?’ the guy checks.

He snorts out a breath. ‘*Limpdick* little prick— but *nah*. Not as far as I know.’

‘Good,’ the guy says, reaching over and slapping him on the back as if they’re actual *friends*. ‘Now if I leave you here you gonna promise not to go back to trying to turn that *attempted* into a *homicide*?’

He watches as Carol, Tommy, and at least one of the guys she was dancing with earlier come staggering past. The dark-haired guy is a *mess*— a surge of satisfaction goes through him— nose obviously broken, possibly cheekbone too—

One of the jocks he thinks dragged him off earlier lingers for a moment, gesturing at Tommy with his head and telling their host, ‘Dan’s going to drive them to the hospital.’

He waits until the little procession disappears inside the house then

turns back to Brad, 'Looks like I won't have the chance now, doesn't it?'

'God Hargrove, you're fucking *psycho*,' the guy says with an admiring laugh, like it's a fucking *compliment*. Fucking freak.

'Yeah, well your party's been *killer*,' he says, draining the rest of the beer then handing the guy the empty bottle, 'but I think I'm gonna get out of here.'

He feels sick and furious the entire drive back home, hands shaking on the wheel, knuckles burning where he split them. It's like a storm in his head— the same old storm as always— the same *fucking*— it was like this that night he *hurt* Harrington— except not quite so bad. Right now—

Fuck.

When he pulls up outside the house he smokes three cigarettes in quick succession, trying to make his heartbeat slow down, trying to calm the heavy, angry, bullish pants of breath he's sucking in through his nose.

Of course, fuck his life, fucking *Neil* is waiting for him in the lounge when he finally staggers inside. Susan's not there. Max— he thinks maybe he sees movement in the shadows of the hall, but his attention is soon all on his old man. 'Where have you been?' Neil asks, getting to his feet in that measured way that tells him he's in *trouble*.

'I was *out*,' he snaps before he can stop himself.

'Out doing *what*?' the man hisses, getting all up in his face. Fuck it, he should have *known*— His dad's been quiet. *Good*, almost, good like the time the man broke his arm when he was seven, good like the time the man knocked his mom unconscious a month before she left, good like when Neil knocked out his two front baby teeth, good like after the man finally came home days later and found him in the house with poor uncle Harry's rotting corpse, good like— and it *never* lasts. Whatever causes it, remorse if that's it, *guilt*— it always just reverts, only it reverts worse than even the usual state of things. He thinks his dad finds being *good* incredibly frustrating.

'Look at you,' Neil continues, and just keeps coming, stalking towards him so he's backing up, ending up pressed against the door like some *weak* little— 'Split lip, split knuckles, and look at the mess you've made of that fancy faggot *mop* you have on your head— when I was your age no man who could call himself a *real man* would ever dream of prancing around with those girly, frou-frou curls. You wouldn't have made it in the army *boy*, they would have beaten the *pansy* out of you inside a week— What have you *really been doing*? Getting caught fucking some other man's whore? Yeah, that'd be right— morals of an alley cat. One of these days you'll get one of them pregnant— if they don't give you something that makes that little pecker of yours drop off— then who'll have to take care of the bitch and her brat? That's right, *me*. We've talked about this before boy, you gotta grow up, you gotta be a *man*, learn to take some responsibility— like you with that car. Wrecking it. I always knew you weren't—'

He can smell his father's breath, sour, foul, rank with bourbon on top of badly cared for teeth. Neil's right up in his face now, almost pressed chest-to-chest, and he just knows how this night is going to end, him bruised, and beyond bruised *diminished* like he is every time he gives way under the weight of his father's fucking *bullshit* and the storm is still raging in his head and—

'Fucking *shut up*!' he snarls, lashing out before he can think, *shoving* Neil away from him. 'You think I give a fuck about your opinion, old man?'

Neil swings, of course he does, and muscle memory makes him want to just take the hit, freeze up, but *something's* welling up in him and making him *dodge*, come back up and plant both hands on his father's chest and *push* as hard as he can.

Neil stumbles back, looking *stunned*, before regaining his footing to come lurching at him. It's like— it's—

His body starts to *burn*, lines of fire everywhere, and it *hurts* like he's starting to come apart, and he recoils from the sensation into a forward lunge, meeting his dad face to face, not flinching, not ducking as the man swings. Neil stops, fist in the air in front of his nose.

The man's eyes are wide, flickering from his face to the fist and back again. 'I fucking *dare* you, old man,' he breathes out, teeth bared, teeth feeling heavy and sharp in his mouth— he thinks his father's eyes flick down to the grimace before Neil *pales* and the fist drops, the man backing away, backing away, then turning and stalking from the room as if nothing even happened.

A moment later Max is rushing into the room just as his legs give way under him and he collapses to the floor. 'Billy!' she hisses, 'Oh my God *are you ok?* Did he hurt you?'

He feels too empty-headed to do anything but shake his head, sitting there until her tugging has him helping her drag him over to the couch. She disappears then comes back a moment later with a beer in one hand and a dish towel full of ice in the other. She hands him the drink but keeps the homemade icepack, holding it against the places where Tommy hit him. 'What happened?' she keeps asking, 'You look all beat up. I told you not to do anything *stupid!*'

Eventually his mind starts working well enough to attempt words— though obviously not well enough to attempt *sensible* words, because the first thing he manages is, 'I think that Robin chick might be a dyke'— which, yeah, is a thought that's been brewing away at the back of his mind since this afternoon, but isn't exactly *relevant* right now.

'Oh thank God,' she breathes, 'It's *so hard* to keep hating her—'

He frowns at her, 'Huh?'

She shakes her head. 'Never mind. Not important— Did you at least have fun at the party?'

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For discussions of homophobia, fear of violent homophobic reprisal, fear of parental rejection, mentions of gross men pervying on young girls- please do tell me if I've missed any.

ALSO, this chapter is from Robin's perspective- originally I was going to have this as a side story and to keep the whole fic from Billy's perspective, but I'm currently thinking we're going to have to have a Steve POV digression at some point in the future to make some of my ideas work, so I decided I might as well add Robin too- Um, yeah. Anyway, I hope you like. Thanks, as always, for reading! You're all awesome!

(This is why you don't treat the best friend like shit, Billy. Sigh.)

Being friends with Steve Harrington is not at all like she expected. Actually, she never really expected to be friends with Steve Harrington in the first place, so she never properly thought about what it would be like being friends with him, so she doesn't really have expectations to be *subverted*, it's just that it seems—

Hm.

It might just be that Steve Harrington is different than she expected. Which feels kind of unfair sometimes. All that time she spent watching the guy because of Tammy and now it's like she was watching an *entirely different person*. Where did the real Steve Harrington go? Has he been replaced with a pod person or something? Or was the old Steve the pod person?

She knows which way she'd prefer it. New Steve is— Actually, he's a real sweetheart. Which makes her sound like her gran or something. "That Richie Lewis is a real sweetheart." "That Zach Everton is a real

sweetheart.” “He might not look it, but Chief Hopper is a real sweetheart...”

Steve Harrington is a real sweetheart. Also he’s kind of a food snob, which is more like Old Steve, but still not what she would have expected. She told him her mom was cooking tuna noodle casserole for dinner the other day and he looked at her like her mom was going to serve her boiled rat. Then, the next day, she could swear the tin of homemade cookies and plate of blueberry muffins he gave her were actually meant as some kind of *food parcel*.

Maybe it’s because he can actually *cook*. Who knew Steve Harrington could cook? She didn’t know. She thinks maybe *no one knew*. Other than Tommy H. and Carol—

Ugh. She does not want to think about *that*. Ew. Imagine— Tommy H.— *Ew*.

At first she was more— Hm— Less *surprised*, more absolutely *gobsmacked*— but now she’s had a few days to think about what he said and they’re jerks. More than jerks— which she already knew, already pretty much *said*, but the more she thinks about it the worse it gets. Like, it seems like they *used* him. *Sexually*. Like, *exploited him* almost. Weird and gross and—

Jerks.

They do not deserve any of Steve’s amazing cooking ever again— like that first night, after the crepes, when Henderson and Erica showed up to try and convince everyone that Billy Hargrove is a zombie and the argument headed long into the night until they were all hungry again— and sick of Steve being all *He’s not a zombie*, Henderson with complete conviction, while also not giving any suggestion as to what Hargrove might be if *zombie* is off the table— guy’s something alright, and that something is something more than *just* a complete grade A *a-hole*— and he decided to make them dinner.

Mac and cheese, and they were all pretty pleased about that, all waiting for him to get the box out— but instead what he does is make mac and cheese from *scratch*. Who does that? Worst still it was the most amazing— Oh my God it was good. *Delicious*. So delicious—

like, *restaurant level* mac and cheese— which is not a thing that should be possible. Mac and cheese is not supposed to be that good.

It's like— *comfort food*, or something, isn't it? Rich, salty, not exactly good for you—

Being Steve Harrington's friend is supremely confusing.

He's supportive, he's funny, he's *kind*, he cooks for you— He'd be the perfect boyfriend if a boyfriend was something she was ever after. But she's not— and he was so *good* about that, even before he told her he's—

Wow. Oh, wow. Steve Harrington is *bisexual*.

Every now and then she forgets and then remembers and feels like someone is pulling the rug out from under her again.

Steve Harrington likes to kiss **boys**, even though *she* doesn't. Not that he'll tell her the kind of boys he wants to kiss, oh no. Her new best friend is being really squirrely about that.

Not that she noticed at first— because all of a sudden she had someone she could talk about girls to, and talk about girls they did. It's so— Is this what it's like, to be normal? To just be able to say so-and-so is so *hot*, and that not being weird or creepy or gross or—

So maybe she got a bit carried away. *They* got carried away. The night after the amazingly interesting trip to the supermarket she'd invited herself back around to the Harrington house— maybe, just a little bit, kind of testing her welcome. Because she really, really, *really* wants this friendship she's suddenly found to be *real*, but part of her thinks the universe is playing some terrible cosmic joke on her. You know, here you go Robin Buckley— enjoy being a lesbian in small-town America and almost finding the best friendship you've ever had with the most unexpected person— except we're going to tear the latter away from you and never give it back. Only, so far, Steve is still her friend.

Steve lets her call him *Stevie*— which is apparently what Tommy H. and Carol called him when they were alone. *Weird*. Cool though. *Ha*

ha, she is probably the only person allowed to call Steve Harrington *Stevie*— unless his parents do. Not that she'd know. They seem to be seriously AWOL— but that's what everyone always said, wasn't it? Always a party at Harrington's house because his parents are always out of town. Poor guy— she'd hate not seeing her parents for even, like, a *week*.

Anyway, the night after the *supermarket trip* Steve had cooked her some chicken casserole thing with a French name she really should be able to remember and they'd drunk three bottles of cheap French red wine and laid on the carpet in what is apparently the "den" and ended up kind of, embarrassingly, *rating* all the girls from Hawkins High—

Not cool, really, she knows. It's *objectification* and all— but it was so *good* being able to talk about it. To giggle about it. To *argue* about it — because no way is Nancy Wheeler a *ten*, even if she's apparently not so much of a priss as she looks. Or Chelsea Cunningham. Chelsea Cunningham is *not* that hot—

Actually, turns out she was wrong on that one, but still—

Honestly Chelsea Cunningham used to be her friend up to grade five, then, all of a sudden, she was a *loser* and the girl— previously nice and smart and *ambitious* enough to talk about working at NASA or something when she grew up— had turned into. Well. *That*. Stupidly hot, but such a *bitch*. *Ignoring* her— and the way she said "Steve" like he's chopped liver.

Everyone knows they hooked up a few times when they were fifteen, so who is she kidding?

In the end she conceded Nancy Wheeler might be a seven or an eight when he'd had the grace to concede the same about Tammy— who she knows damn well he never hooked up with, because if he *had*— No girl Steve Harrington has ever even *kissed* is less than an eight, apparently, no matter personality, looks, personal habits, or tendency to be a complete raging *bitch* to him recently.

Since Billy Hargrove arrived in town so many previously sensible— if even only a *little bit*— people have turned into complete morons.

More on that later, though.

The sad thing is that he wasn't even rating them so highly out of some bullshit, competitive, "*Steve Harrington* would never lower himself to kiss anyone less than perfect" thing. No. He actually seems to *like them all*.

Being "really sweet to her cat" is not a good reason to rate *Amy Wójcik* an eight, Jesus Steve. She's like a *six*— Wow, she is turning into a teenage boy. Reducing girls to their physical appearance— except not really. Amy's *cute enough*, but that cat is the only thing that girl is *ever* nice to—

Ok, yeah, she might have had a *tiny* crush on her in sixth grade, long before Tammy, but—

A lot of the girls she's ever had crushes on either seem to hate her on sight, hate her on acquaintance, or don't notice she exists. It's *hard*— and getting to complain about it is so *freeing*, but also *easy to get carried away*.

In some ways they have surprisingly similar tastes— at least as far as the sixes, sevens and eights go. Smart, cute, sweet— then there's the girls you'd have to be completely stupid not to realise are stupidly hot— but then you get to the matter of *personal taste*. Like, she would not rate Belle Rowley— captain of the girls wrestling team— a *nine*. Belle Rowley who effortlessly knocked out Dan Caulfield when he grabbed her nearly non-existent boobs and made an obnoxious *honk honk* sound. Belle Rowley is *terrifying*— that should *not* be so hot, Steve.

Even when she'd thought Belle might be a lesbian— Which, so *not*. Carol had caught her with Zach Everton under the bleachers and then told *everyone* and now they're openly *dating*— she would have not rated Belle anything higher than a *five*. Scary does not do it for her.

Oh God, she thinks scary does it for Steve.

Anyway, before she forces herself to think about all of— *that*, she wants a few more minutes to luxuriate in having a friend like Steve.

Who knew Steve could be a friend like Steve?

He really was kind of an asshole at school— though, she will admit, on pain of over-inflating his ego and after thinking about it a bit, he was never anywhere near as bad as either Tommy H. or Carol. Not *nice*, or at least not nice all the time— and wow did he *never* take class seriously, but the crueller pranks and taunts and gossip could always be traced back to those two— particularly if the focus of whatever it was never did anything to anyone.

Though if they had done something— either to him, or (especially) to the other two, then it was more likely to be Steve who instigated— and he rarely balked at joining in, always so happy with Tommy H. and Carol by his side—

Oh. Oh now she feels kinda *sad* for him.

She does not want to feel sad about *anything* involving Tommy H. or Carol.

It doesn't matter, she may be absolutely *never* going to put her mouth anywhere near his ass but she is going to be the best friend he ever had— because she really does think he's going to try to do the same for her. So weird. Her life is just *so weird*.

The way he talked about finding her a girlfriend, his disappointment that he didn't know of any other girls in town who like girls, the way he was so sure she's going to be going to college and that when she does she'll find an *awesome girl almost good enough* for her, because she is apparently absolutely *amazing*.

No one other than her parents has ever thought she was *amazing* before— and she's not sure her parents will still think she's amazing if they ever find out.

She's so scared. She doesn't want to think about how scared she is, has been for so long, but she is *terrified* they'll find out and that when they do she won't be her dad's *Honey-Pumpkin* anymore, her mom's *Little Bird*, that they won't smile when they see her, always ask her about her day, *listen* to her even if she's talking bullshit, act like she can do anything she puts her mind to, think she's good enough to go

to school for her music if she wants, or to film school if that's what she ends up choosing, that the family dinners they both make sure they have time for— even though they're both so busy— will stop happening, that the college fund they each started separately a couple of months after they met and then combined when they got married will suddenly dry up— and it's not the thought of the money disappearing that upsets her, just the proof that they knew each knew the other was the *one* almost at once and that they knew they'd have a kid and they were so sure that kid would be *amazing*—

Yeah, she is so, so, so *scared*— and having a friend like Steve isn't enough to make that fear go away— no matter how amazing *he* is he could never replace her parents for her, no one could— but the way he responded when he found out has given her the first taste of *hope* she thinks she's ever had that things might actually turn out ok.

Eventually.

—

Still, she does not want to think about it too much.

She also doesn't want to think about the question of *what should she do about the Billy Hargrove thing*, but she probably should. Not the *is Billy Hargrove a zombie* question— because, you know, zombie or not the guy is— *horrible*. He's just *horrible*.

Like, the worst.

Like, *just as bad as Tommy H.*

Maybe *worse* than Tommy H.

He's rude and mean and crude and actually, legitimately, *scary*. Like, there have been times when she's actually worried he might *hurt her*. And there's the way he hurt *Steve*— everyone heard about that. Admittedly everyone seemed to find it hilariously funny and at the time she, personally, hadn't cared, but now she does and—

And the way he acts like a complete *jackass* to pretty much every grown man and most of the boys he meets. Poor Mr Duvall— possibly one of the sweetest men in town, having that puffed up little— and

after all that stuff with the old man's son, Jared— Everyone might have turned up at the funeral after the guy finally wiped himself out speeding out by the quarry, but they were either pretending to mourn or doing it out of respect for his father, not Jared himself. Ass— and then for Mr Duvall to have to deal with someone like Hargrove, someone so like Jared.

She does not like Billy Hargrove. Like, at *all*.

Not that he likes her either. Oh God does he *not like her*.

She caught him looking when she was— Wow. Thinking about it, what exactly was she doing? Feeling poor Steve up, in *public*. She can feel her face heat. At the time she was thinking she was kind of *teasing* Carol. The way the other girl had been looking at her, looking at *Steve*— she *deserved* it, deserved worse than seeing someone actually touch her— *whatever Steve was to her*— when she's not allowed to anymore. But then she caught Billy Hargrove looking at her like he wanted to *rip her head off*.

The way he is with Steve—

She'd been suspicious by the time Steve had dropped her off home that day, but by the end of *today*, at the pool— The way he'd *looked* at Steve's near-naked body— Billy Hargrove has a *crush* on Steve. If you can call it a crush. *Crush* seems too innocent for something that guy might feel—

And it would all be fine, it would all be good, she would *perfectly* enjoy watching him pine sadly from afar— except she thinks it's reciprocated.

Steve's so *attentive* to Hargrove, that's the thing. So *sweet* to that absolutely undeserving *prick*. Nervous, but not so much in a *fearful* way— And she's caught him *looking*—

Hands. Always the hands. Hargrove does anything with his hands anywhere near Steve and Steve's like a dog watching its owner waving around a piece of steak.

Ugh.

If she's right she does not blame Steve for avoiding the question of what kind of guys is he into. Who would want to admit to being into that violent *psycho*? Other than at least half the girls in town—

But they don't really know him, do they? They've never really spent any time trapped in a confined space with the guy at his dickish best — though maybe they at least have the benefit of him not being *jealous* of them.

She thinks that's it— maybe not all of it. She's not vain enough to assume Hargrove would magically like her if she wasn't allowed to touch Steve whenever she wants to, but she thinks the fact that she *can* and he *can't* probably isn't helping things.

She's not going to help him out either. She's not going to let on to Steve that his *Billy* thing might not be one-sided— because Hargrove is an absolute *prick*, an *undeserving* prick, and she knows if the blond ever gets his hands on Steve then Steve is going to get *hurt*. Hurt even worse than by Tommy H. and Carol. Hurt maybe not just emotionally — she can see Hargrove freaking out about being into a guy and really, seriously *hurting* the guy in question. It's too dangerous. Steve could get *killed*. It's not *safe*—

No way is she doing anything to get her friend hurt like that. *No way*.

So what should she do? Directly running interference seems kind of not a very *friend* thing to do, and it also might lead her into direct conflict with Hargrove— which is not something she wants. He is, like, the *poster boy* for the kind of guy who is not afraid to hit girls— So maybe she should just watch? Be supportive if Steve ever confides in her, but also not *encourage* him in any way, at all, whatsoever. That seems about right.

Maybe she should try to find him a boyfriend the way he's determined they can find her a girlfriend. There has to be at least one other gay— or *bisexual*— guy in town other than Billy Hargrove— Oh God. *Billy Hargrove is*— at least *Stevesexual*, if not actually bisexual or gay— That's even harder to believe than the fact *Steve Harrington is* bisexual. What kind of world is she living in? Nothing makes sense anymore.

Also, actually, there are real, legitimate, living *monsters* out there. So maybe surprise gay/bisexual guys shouldn't be so, hah, *surprising*.

Why aren't there more *lesbians*? This seems deeply unfair.

Oh, hey, when she hangs out at Steve's they could call it the *Hawkins Homosexual(-ish) Hangout at Harrington's House*. Quintuple H for the win.

Though the two of them are hardly a definitive collection of Hawkins less than *heterosexual* inhabitants. Not that she wants Billy Hargrove hanging out with her and Steve. Ick.

She's not sure about Will Byers though. Is the kid even *gay*? Everyone seems to think he is but it's not like they've heard it from the horse's mouth—

So, for now Quintuple H will just have to remain a very, highly, *selective* club.

—

She's kind of being a loser. Well, she *is* a loser. She was *always* a loser. Robin Buckley, loser queen of Hawkins—

Even *Barb Holland* was considered less of a loser than her, and no one really liked Barb— Ok. That might, strictly speaking, not entirely be *true*. Nancy Wheeler liked Barb. The other prissy, do-gooder kids liked Barb. *She* just didn't like Barb that much.

Maybe it was just the— at time *intense*— sapphic vibes between her and Nancy and the fact that she'd sometimes, maybe, wondered if the two of them actually were a *couple*— which, ok, yeah, maybe she was a bit *jealous*— until the whole unexpected Nancy + Steve thing. Anyway.

Also Barb was a bitch to her.

She'd only been trying— oh, so *surreptitiously*— to see if she'd found a fellow traveller— asking the kind of questions that only a like-minded girl would have understood, or at least she'd *thought*, but Barb had freaked out and gotten really *nasty*.

Anyway. Still sad the girl was dead.

Still *weird* that apparently she'd died in Steve's pool, or something. That part of the story isn't clear. What was clear, at least until today, is that Steve has an *awesome* pool that she could be swimming in without worrying about girls catching her *looking*. Even if she never looks. She's so *careful* not to look—

Ok. *Until today*, but in her defence being wrapped around Steve, him knowing and *supporting*, had made her feel weirdly *invincible*. Like it was ok, as long as it was just them. That she could be *honest*.

Anyway. Until today it was *Steve has an awesome pool that he won't let anyone use for no good reason*. In the last little-over-a-week since Russian codes, Russian bases, *monsters*, and the birth of a beautiful friendship she has caught him standing over the water and staring into it with a completely out of place and *creepy* horror on half a dozen separate occasions. Always the same place too.

He'd told her about the Barb thing— which she'd thought was stupid since as far as she could see there was no evidence of there being anything untoward with the pool— Shows what she knows. *Jesus*, the look on Hargrove's face—

Anyway. The *get Billy Hargrove to come around and convince Steve there's nothing wrong with his pool* plan had actually been Erica's idea. In part because three out of four members of the *Is Billy Hargrove a zombie?* club were getting sick of seeing the cool blue water on the recent hot, sticky days and having the fourth member freak out if they even remotely *suggested* they might just dip a toe in. Just a *toe* Steve, nothing more.

The excuse had been that Hargrove would have to strip down to his swim trunks in his capacity as lifeguard, so they could see if he was turning blue or purple or green or *rotting* anywhere.

Steve had *not* been onboard, but they are all getting used to the idea that if Erica *wants* something Erica is going to *get* that something and they all better just accept that and stop fighting.

“She's going to end up going to Harvard or Yale or Stanford or

something and running Wall Street, I just know it,” Steve had muttered to her while they watched Erica climb onto the back of Henderson’s bike to be delivered back home.

“Or becoming President,” she’d added.

He’d just nodded.

Anyway, the *pool plan* had backfired. Because apparently Steve isn’t being an idiot and there *is* something wrong with his pool. Something that made Billy Hargrove freak out and made the little— possibly gay — Byers boy get upset and all the other weird kids start fussing over him.

Maybe it’s haunted by Barb’s ghost? Would that be cool or supremely *uncool*? Hm. The existence of ghosts *would* be cool— but the existence of ghosts in her *friend’s* pool would not be. And the existence of *Barb’s* ghost seems kind of *sad*. So, in the balance, *uncool*.

Are they going to have to exorcise Steve’s pool?

Is she going to end up inadvertently joining another club? She’s already a member of the *People who know about Hawkins weirdness* club, the *Is Billy Hargrove a zombie?* club, the *Quintuple H* club, and now the *Exorcisers of Steve’s pool* club. Wow. She has suddenly developed the *weirdest* social life.

And why does Billy Hargrove’s angry little sister hate her so much? What has she ever done to the girl? It’s so confusing.

It is one thing, and *one thing only*, in the guy’s favour that he seems to care so much about the redhead, seems so eager and willing to protect her— though if she had a brother and he started shouting at some gross old man in public who was staring at her ass—

Like, if she *thinks* about it it’s a cool thing to do, the kind of thing most guys just ignore, but also *so unbelievably embarrassing*. And the girl was so relaxed about it, like she’s just used to him—

Ugh. Billy Hargrove hurts her head.

Anyway, how is she going to have time to hang out with all these

fellow losers and deal with all this eldritch shit if she gets another job? Well, the plan so far is to have her and Steve get a job at the same place— since, so far, it's unclear if the mall's being rebuilt and if they'll still have their old job if it is— so that's one loser accounted for.

There's always a couple openings at *Family Video*, which sounds *perfect* for her and *absolutely terrible* for him, so fingers crossed. She doesn't think she's ever met someone even remotely her age less interested in movies. Or even TV.

You go “Hey Steve, you want to watch something?” And he goes, “sure,” then has no opinion on what to watch. “I dunno, whatever you/Dustin/Erica/everyone else wants to watch,” is his stock answer whenever she asks him to pick something. “What do you like?” earns her a shrug. “Do you actually like movies and TV at *all*?” gets something along the line of “I dunno. They're ok. A bit boring sometimes— better if whoever I'm with is enjoying them.” And to the question of “*Oh my God Steve, why are they boring?*” another shrug and “the people in them don't make sense. I can never really tell what they're feeling about anything.” Which just seems to her to mean he has only ever watched crappy things with crappy writing because everyone he knows has crappy taste.

This she vows to fix, but no joy so far.

—Also, then you ask him what actually happened in the movie and he's got everything, like, *totally wrong*. What the hell— She thought maybe the *Back to the Future* thing was a fluke, but apparently not?—

Parts (mainly Henderson and Erica) of the *Is Billy Hargrove a zombie?* club have discussed maybe having a zombie movie marathon to make sure they know all the possible signs to watch out for if Billy Hargrove is a zombie— but Steve thinks it's a bad idea after everything that's happened recently, and that Erica's too *young*, and even if she gets him to come around she's worried he'll just wander off and make them all homemade salted caramel popcorn in the middle of it like he did when Henderson decided they were all watching *The Neverending Story*— Weird kid, he started humming along to the theme song and looking all *misty eyed*.

The salted caramel popcorn had also been amazingly good.

She still can't believe *Steve Harrington* is such a good cook.

*She still can't believe **Steve Harrington** is rapidly becoming the best friend she's ever had, **ever**.*

This town really is so *weird*.

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For homophobic language, some evidence of internalised homophobia, mentions of the possibility of violent homophobic reprisals, homophobia in general, some mention of HIV/AIDS, mentions of slut-shaming, mentions of child abuse and domestic abuse, mentions of suicide- please, please do tell me if I've missed any.

Billy's thought processes can be a bit... interesting. All those things to deny and refuse to think about... Anyway, hope you enjoy, and thanks as always for reading, commenting and leaving kudos! Also, stay safe any fellow Aussies up North in Queensland and NSW. You have my sympathies.

He falls asleep easy, but his dreams— It's like he can't escape them. Every time he claws his way to the surface, wakes panting, sweating, *terrified*, they reach for him, grab him, claw him back down—

At least once, when he's lying, trapped in the place between waking and sleeping, he thinks he should be dreaming of his father, of fucking *Neil* and all the things the man has done, or even of turning into the *monster*, of his body coming apart around him, but, like so often recently, in his dreams he is trapped the Upside Down.

Sometimes he's in his car, huddling, humming along to the memory of songs he's forgetting the lyrics to. Sometimes he's walking the dead town. Sometimes he's pacing back and forth, back and forth, muttering, always muttering— 'She's safe. They're both safe. I know they are— I *know they are*— You didn't win— You *hear me*?! You didn't win you sack of shit! I'll find you— I will— I *will*. I'll find you, and when I do— No. No, no, no, no, no— This isn't— this isn't—'

And sometimes he's in what he now recognises as Harrington's gross

pool— except there's no water, just— *rot*. And he comes there, he remembers, though he doesn't know *how* he can remember it, to see the body. He thinks it's a girl. Not much flesh left now, mainly bones, bones and rot and shreds of cloth and he talks to her, sometimes because she's the only human thing he's seen in *so, so long*—

When he's awake, awake properly— before he goes to check on Max and finds her asleep on the couch— he can't help feeling kind of stupid. Brain obviously having taken in what Harrington said about that Barb? girl and spitting it out into his nightmares.

By breakfast fucking Neil has decided that Susan deserves her car back. Fucking Neil has also decided to pretend he doesn't exist— not so much as a glance his way, just complete verbal and physical avoidance. It's almost funny.

Be more funny if he had a ride to the pool. He's working until lunch today and he doesn't think not showing up after all that not showing up he did so recently is going to do him many favours as far as staying employed is concerned.

He'd get Susan to give him a ride, but the moment they've all finished eating she— and her car keys— are off doing *something* with the old bastard, so it's just him and Max. Like usual.

'I'll call Steve,' is her solution to the problem.

A lot of— *thoughts*— come surging at him at the suggestion, but—

But.

Who else is there?

It'll be fine. It'll be *cool*. It'll— He just won't think about *anything* that fucking prick Tommy insinuated and it'll be—

—

Fuck.

—

He needs to get some more cigarettes.

He sits on the couch and ashes into an empty coffee cup, chain smoking and trying not to fidget while he waits. Yeah. Yeah— he just has to be cool. He just has to—

If he thinks about it he's going to end up wondering what Tommy meant, and there's no answer to that question that's not going to make him lose his shit, so he's *not going to think about it*.

Does he look like a faggot? Does that fucking *dead* prick think he looks like a faggot?

No forget that. He's not thinking about that. Not *ever*.

Anyway, beyond— *you know*— how fucking *dare* the guy talk like that about Harrington. Like—

Yeah. He can't think about it. Never going to fucking think about it.

Never—

Out of the corner of his eye he sees Max lurking. '*What?*'

She bites her lip. 'You're being weird— I mean, *weirder* even than usual—'

He nods. Yep. He can see that— 'Don't worry about it. It's not— it's boring fucking *guy stuff*, ok? Not anything about the Upside Down or whatever.'

A pause and then, tentatively, 'I know it's like, *super lame*, and I know you are way too— *you*— but if you need to— and oh my *God* I can't believe I'm about to say this— but, like, *talk about it—?*'

He shakes his head, 'I cannot begin to tell you how much I do not want to do that right now.'

She blinks at him. 'Shit. Um—'

'It's fine Maxine, don't worry about it—'

Which is when Harrington pulls up and his mind decides to replay the words *cocksucking little slut* in Tommy H's fucking *irritating* voice. Oh God.

He stands, lurches out of his seat really, then his hand goes reflexively to his hair, trying to smooth it down, and— *How is he actually going to be able to do this?*

No fucking choice Hargrove, get your fucking shit together.

Harrington's waiting for him when he leaves the house, a big smile splitting those coral lips. 'Hey!'

'Hey,' he returns, feeling awkward as fuck.

A little frown appears between dark brows for a split second, 'Everything ok?'

'Yeah, it's fine,' he says, dismissive, thinks of saying something about getting into a fight or Tommy H. being a prick if the brunet asks about why his knuckles are split and his face bruised— but then he realises that they aren't. His hands look fine. His face doesn't even hurt— it wasn't even bruised in the mirror when he was getting ready, was it? *Fuck.*

'You sure?' a glance and Harrington looks so fucking *concerned*.

It's kind of *outrageous*, the guy's like— There are rules, ok? Asking him *how he is* is bad enough, but then not letting him blow the question off—

'Sorry,' Harrington adds, looking away, then giving him a tiny, *rueful* smile, 'None of my business. So, *pool?*'

Fucking Harrington, always so fucking *considerate*.

He nods, getting in the car. 'You mind if I smoke?'

'You're *asking?*' the brunet laughs, and then, before he can get *too* offended, 'Sure thing man, go right ahead. It's just you and me.'

Why does his brain decide now is the right time to ask, 'You still

hang out with Wheeler and—’ his tongue trips on the name, ‘B- Byers much?’

On his knees for psycho—

‘Nancy and Jonathan?’ Harrington’s nose scrunches up. Fucking *Nancy*—

Jonathan.

A shrug, ‘Not really. They’re always, you know, busy with stuff— and we really don’t have that much in common, you know? Why? Do you need to talk to them about something?’

He looks away. ‘Just curious.’

‘They’re actually both pretty cool—’ the brunet offers. ‘Like, *so smart*, you know?’ Like he fucking *cares*. ‘So, if— I dunno. If this shit starts happening again, you can always go to one of them, ok? They’ll do their best to help if *I* can’t— or you don’t want my help or something.’

‘There’s *no fucking Universe* where I’d rather talk to *either* of those two *losers* than you,’ he snaps before he realises he’s going to. *Jesus Christ*, he is losing it today. For fuck’s sake—

‘Oh,’ Harrington whispers. He risks a glance at the guy and sees him pink and smiling this tiny little smile to himself.

—

The brunet clears his throat, ‘Honestly, you too, man—’ Oh fuck why does that make him feel so good? ‘—Not that they’re losers. They’re really *not*, not once you get to know them—’

He snorts, disbelieving. ‘It’s *true*,’ Harrington insists.

‘You’re really not going to be able to convince me on that one,’ he tells the brunet, which makes the guy laugh for some reason.

‘Well, they’re not as cool as you, I’ll give you that.’

Harrington thinks he's cool? *Of course Harrington thinks he's cool, the guy's not **completely** stupid.*

Harrington's also still talking, '—thinking of going to see Heather at the hospital today if you want to come, you know, when you get off work—? I mean, you *don't have to*—'

Guilt. 'Yeah, sounds good.' He feels like an asshole, he hasn't even *attempted* to find out how she is.

'*Really?*' Harrington clears his throat. 'Oh, yeah, ok, *cool*. Max said you get off at lunch—?'

He confirms when he wants Harrington to pick him up then they slide back into a kind of awkward silence. *Cocksucking*— His eyes keep catching on the brunet's mouth.

Harrington waves him goodbye when he gets out of the car, at first kind of excited and then a little awkward, and all he can think is *Jesus Christ*. Ok. OK. He has to stop thinking about it.

He has to— and he manages it for a while too, but the thing is— that not paying attention to the mess Tommy H. made of his thoughts means he starts thinking about *Neil* instead.

Like, mid-morning, up in the chair, watching the kids do stupid shit, all of a sudden it occurs to him that his dad *backed down* the night before.

He *won*.

Holy fucking hell— *He won*.

That shit's never happened before. Neil has *never* backed down. Not from *anyone*—

Actually, no, a couple of weeks before Uncle Harry shot himself the two men had a fucking *massive fight* and he thinks Uncle Harry *won*. He can't really remember, since his dad had punched him hard enough to leave him loopy and sick—

Huh.

Wait— was the reason Uncle Harry got into it with Neil because his dad had—?

Hah, He can't remember right. He can't even say for sure.

Fucking Neil.

Wait— if he *won*—

His dad is *not going to be ok with that*. Oh God.

Oh God—

But. *But!* If Neil starts shit again he now knows he can *win*. They both know—

Maybe that means Neil will leave him the fuck alone.

Imagine that. Neil leaving him *alone*.

Jesus.

It's Adam's turn in the chair after his, and as he's getting down so the other guy can get up, the dark-haired guy says, 'That was some fight you got into with Tommy H. last night.'

'You heard about that?' he wonders who else heard about it. Is he going to be getting another visit by Chief Hopper—?

'I was *there*, man,' the guy says, then snorts out a laugh, 'Just for curiosity's sake, do you recognise me from anything other than working here?'

'The fuck're you getting at?' this seems like a trap. He feels himself start to tense up— Still, he keeps lingering by the chair to see what the guy has to say.

Adam nods, then laughs again, kind of ruefully. 'We were on the basketball team together— but I already pretty much worked out you don't remember.'

He peers up at the guy— yeah, kind of familiar. A much better

looking potato-faced jock than most of them. ‘You expect me to apologize, or—?’

Adam shakes his head, ‘No way. Don’t apologize for being you. It’s— Yeah. Must drive Tommy H. up the wall. Is that what you were fighting about, the fact you don’t see him as being even *remotely* fucking important, unlike how he sees himself?’

He shrugs, feels his face scrunch into a look of distaste. ‘He was being a fucking asshole.’

‘Yeah, but—’ a shrug of one broad, well-formed shoulder. ‘Ok, I admit. I’m *curious*, sue me. You are a tough nut to crack. I mean, I saw you hanging around with Steve yesterday— You two friends now? Because that’s what everyone’s saying?’

‘Why the fuck does *everyone* care?’ he snaps.

‘Because it’s small-town America, the mall just collapsed, and everyone’s bored out of their minds— Anyway, it’s Steve— he’s, well, he’s always been hard to ignore— *He* what you and Tommy H. were fighting about?’

No way is he answering *that* fucking question, but— If Adam was on the basketball team— and, of course, the guy probably grew up here in this shithole— then maybe he can give some insight into something else that bugs him if he thinks about it. ‘What the fuck happened between those two—? I mean, I’ve heard Tommy H.’s bullshit about it, and I’ve heard some other gossip, or whatever, like I know Harrington chose Wheeler over his friends, or something, but— I don’t know— I’ve gotten to know the guy a bit recently and it’s— Yeah. Feels like there’s something else going on there.’

‘I have no fucking clue,’ the dark-haired guy answers after a moment. ‘I probably know as much as you do— no one, other than those three — Steve, Tommy H., Carol— probably actually knows. I don’t even think *Nancy Wheeler* knows. You’re right though, it is— *weird*. The whole time growing up they were like *this*—’ the guy holds up a hand, index and middle finger crosses tightly, ‘—I mean, I’ve got friends I’ve known since before first grade, friends I trust to have my back, friends I would do a whole bunch of stupid shit for— but I *don’t*

have friends the way those three were friends. Whatever it was I think it's pretty clear Steve did something to piss them off.'

'Yeah, but it's *Harrington*—' he protests. What the fuck could the brunet do that was that bad. He's—

Adam shrugs. 'I don't get it either.'

The words "He ever done anything to make you think he's a faggot?" come tripping to the tip of his tongue, but he bites them down. *Fuck*. Jesus fucking *Christ*— if he actually said that out *loud*—

'You ok?' Adam asks.

'Fine,' he snaps, 'I just gotta—' he gestures vaguely away, then turns and leaves. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Ignoring all the *everyone* that seems to want his attention he goes and — not *hides*, not exactly— in the storage room, lighting up a cigarette the moment the door's shut. *What the fuck was that?* Huh? Was he really going to all but tell some small-town jock that Harrington might be a faggot? There'd be a lynching. *Harrington* would get lynched.

Fuck. He's *shaking*. He wraps his arms around himself as he smokes, pacing back and forth in the confined space.

He's not— Personally, he's never found the fact that someone was a faggot to be a reason to beat them up— though, yeah, the same doesn't go for old pervs hollering at him about the fact he looks like a girl and his cocksucking lips and offering him ten or twenty bucks to put the promise they see but he's not offering into practice. *Those* kind of guys usually regret their life pretty soon— but faggots, the normal kind of faggots that accept "fuck off" if they try to hit on him, the ones that really aren't trying to start shit with anyone, just trying to be left alone— those he's never had a problem with.

He knows he's not one. He's always liked girls— their bodies, the way they smell, the way they *feel* too much to be a faggot. It's not something he ever worries about— not even *Neil* and all his bullshit, the man's fucking neuroses about being a *man* have ever been able to

make him doubt himself. Since the first time he got his dick wet he's had incontrovertible evidence that he likes the ladies—

So, he's never been frightened of faggots. He hasn't been *friends* with them— having a whole bunch of cocksuckers as friends is a great way to make the world think you're a cocksucker too— but he's left them alone, and the few times he's caught guys hassling them, trying to *hurt* them, he's never felt the need to hold himself back from showing that kind of guy their *place*. Teaching them that they're not nearly the big, strong, tough *man* they think they are—

Which all means he's seen firsthand the kind of shit faggots have to put up with— especially since that AIDS or whatever it is disease started killing them— and if *Harrington's* actually one, if that's the reason he and Tommy H. fell out, if that's the reason Wheeler cheated on him then dumped him for a weedy little *dweeb* like Byers — the brunet will be in for a world of hurt when the rest of the town finds out.

He doesn't like the idea.

Harrington's a *good* guy. Pretty much *everyone* thinks so— everyone not Tommy H. or Carol or shallow enough to let those two *losers* change the way they think—

Still, if the brunet's a *faggot* and people find out— if he stays friends with him will they think *he's* a faggot too? The thought makes him *uncomfortable*. But. *BUT*. If Harrington's a faggot the guy's going to need someone to keep him *safe*— winning *one* fight against *one* Russian doesn't change the fact the guy is— well. Pretty much hopeless at that shit.

It's like the little Byers boy— If he ever catches anyone giving that kid shit for being queer he's not just going to stand back and let it happen, is he? Kid's a good kid. Especially in comparison to the other boys—

So, if he's willing to protect the little Byers, then he should be willing to protect *Harrington*. There's nothing different there, it's not like his friendship with the brunet means anything *more* than his, whatever, with the little Byers. Does it?

No. Of course not.

Wait. Since when is he *friends* with Harrington—

Actually, probably since the two of them drove across town together to go after a *monster*.

Huh. Harrington's his friend. *Harrington's* his *friend*.

Huh.

Anyway— he's probably getting ahead of himself. *Does he even know Harrington is a faggot?*

No.

It's funny— he *saw* Harrington's eyes on Chelsea's ass, heard what she said about being with the guy, yet the idea of *Harrington* = *faggot* is easy to believe— but he has no proof. Yeah— *proof*. If he can prove it one way or the other then he'll be able to really work out what he feels about it.

If he can prove it that means Harrington has actually—

—*cksucking little*—

He *does not* like that idea. The idea of some guy thinking they can just— Harrington's a *good guy*. Too good a guy to be on his knees for some other faggot that thinks he's better than him. That thinks he can *use* him—

A guy like Harrington— if it was anything else, anything other than taking advantage, then there's no way the guy would let Harrington out of his sight. It'd be obvious already. There'd be no need to look for proof, because the guy would be hanging around and guarding the brunet in case someone tried to steal him.

So, if some guy is *taking advantage*— if he keeps his eyes open and catches the guy he can probably see him off. Make him leave Harrington alone. The guy does not need some bastard lurking around making use of his charms—

Getting ahead of yourself again Hargrove.

Ok. Yes. *Proof*—

Could the Robin thing be proof? If she is a dyke she might be his—

What the fuck do you call it when faggots pretend to be straight by pretending to have a girlfriend? Whatever it is, she might be doing that for him while he does that for her. So—

If he can prove she's a dyke it might help prove Harrington's a faggot
—

How though?

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't actually think I need to put a trigger warning on this chapter, but perhaps I'm just so used to writing Billy the way I am I've become oblivious as he is, so please let me know if I've missed any.

So sorry it took so long to reply to everyone, unexpected business happened. Anyway I did manage to get this chapter done though, so there's that. Thank you all as always for commenting and leaving kudos! I really do appreciate them.

When he climbs into the beemer Harrington greets him with the entirely unwanted news that the kids have decided to go to the brunet's house and investigate the pool— 'I was kind of hoping, um, that you'd— *you know*— come around after we see Heather and help me stop them doing anything *too* stupid—' Harrington shrugs, rueful, 'I told them I wasn't going to be home until then— I didn't think they'd listen, but both the Sinclairs and the Wheelers had family stuff, so—'

He agrees, of course, and is displeased to learn— when he suggests they go pick up Max— that she's already out somewhere doing something with the non-Sinclair, non-Wheeler members of the "Party."

Then Harrington asks, 'Will mac and cheese be alright for dinner?— because Dustin's been nagging me for it again— Assuming you and Max can stay— Do you want to stay? For dinner? Everyone else is.'

'Yeah, alright,' he says, lighting a cigarette and looking out the window, avoiding those dark eyes though he doesn't know why. 'And yeah, mac and cheese sounds good— Max loves that shit.'

He better leave a message for Susan or something, no reason to piss his dad off so soon after his victory.

At the hospital they run into Heather's aunt and uncle—Tommy H.'s fucking *parents*. 'Stevie,' the two of them coo— and they don't look like the owners of that gloriously tacky 70s love nest. They're fucking yuppie perfection, in everything from their careful coiffures to the white collar and cuffs on Tommy H. Senior's blue and white striped shirt.

The woman— from the look of her he might as well say older, female *Tommy H.*— takes over, 'Oh Stevie, it feels like *forever* since we've seen you— Have you come to see Thomas? Because we already took him home. Broken nose, cheekbone, and *eye orbit*, whatever that is— were you there? Did you see what happened? That *Carol* said he got drunk and fell down the stairs at the Dailey house—'

'What?' Harrington breathes out, eyes big. 'No, I'm sorry. I didn't even know he got hurt—'

He lets himself drift out of the conversation, heading over to Heather's bedside, looking down at her all plugged into all those machines. He feels— he feels *bad* about *her*, but he hopes no one looks at him, because for all looking at her makes *guilt* rise, it's nowhere near as strong as the sense of vicious satisfaction he finds himself feeling about Tommy H.'s broken face.

Harrington asks the— are they *Holloways*? He thinks they might be Holloways— a bunch of questions about Tommy H.— which he only half listens to. The guy's going to be alright, apparently— he did some damage, but not enough to even permanently fuck him up— unless his nose doesn't heal right.

It's kind of amusing that the guy hasn't gone bitching to everyone about the fact *he* did it— but maybe that's just some evidence that somewhere in there Tommy H. has something like a survival instinct.

They want Harrington to go around later, to go see their son like the two are still friends, but the brunet manages to deflect without telling them their kid is an asshole and doesn't deserve his friendship. After that the topic changes to Heather— and Harrington introduces him as the guy who found her and brought her to the hospital.

There's a lot of thanks then, as well as repetitions of "It's such a

tragedy, first this happens to her and then her *parents*—” But he’s pleased to discover the doctors are hopeful. Her scans are all showing signs that she *will* wake up, eventually, once her body has recovered from— and here they ask him if he knows anything about what happened to her, and he has to say “no” and they start going on about “poisoning” and her being “attacked” and asking him if he knows anyone who would want to hurt her.

‘I can’t say I do,’ he replies, and that’s *true*. Mind Flayer aside— ‘Everyone likes her at the pool— not just us lifeguards, but the kids and the parents and even the other teens.’ A lot of the time, when shit like— well, not like *this*, but like what they’re pretending this is — happens the people that crowd around acting like the victim was a perfect innocent loved by everyone are probably kidding themselves, but he doesn’t see it with Heather. She’s an honestly *good* person.

Harrington pipes up with a statement about never hearing anyone say anything bad about her and that she is pretty much universally liked —

The Holloways sigh in unison, the male— actually *Daniel*, “call me *Dan*”— coming over to her bedside— him moving out of the way to let the older man take her hand— ‘It must have been someone from out of town,’ the woman— *Patricia*— says, nodding as if this is something she’s said a hundred times before. ‘It’ll be those filthy *carnies* Mayor Kline brought in for his *stupid* Forth of July— I tell you, that’s who it will be—’

‘Hopper’s looking into it,’ *Dan* says.

‘Which is *something*, still—’

Soon after that Harrington manages to extract them— with promises he’ll go visit “Thomas” soon— The moment they’re out of the room, the brunet’s shoulders rise up by his ears, a pinched look coming over his face, before he actually *shakes* off whatever he’s thinking. ‘When we get out of here can I have a cigarette?’ a small, *bitter* smile, ‘I know I should probably go buy some—’

‘I don’t mind sharing,’ he interrupts the brunet. ‘Though— if we could stop somewhere so I can get some more?’

‘Of course,’ Harrington replies. ‘I should— Let me pay for them, ok? You’ve given me so many recently—’

He shakes his head. ‘Nah. Don’t worry about it—’ and then, when the other guy looks like he’s about to protest, ‘*Don’t worry about it.*’

Brown eyes flick to his face for a moment, before Harrington nods. ‘Ok man, if that’s what you want—’ the brunet sighs. ‘I did not expect those two to be here— I guess I should have thought about it first, though—’ Harrington glances at him again, ‘Do you know what happened to Tommy?’

Fuck. How is he supposed to answer that—? If he lies and Harrington finds out later— Fuck fuck fuck. He shrugs, trying to play it cool. ‘He got super fucking *drunk* at that guy’s house and then came after me. I couldn’t get him to stop, so—’

‘Woah—’ Harrington grabs his arm and pulls him around to face the brunet. ‘Are you saying *you* beat up Tommy?’

‘He was being an *asshole*,’ he spits, and then, a bit calmer, ‘He kept pushing me, trying to *hit* me—’

‘Wow, yeah, that was pretty fucking *dumb* of him—’ Harrington says, letting go of him to wrap those long arms around his own waist. ‘*Why*, though?’

That is not a question he is going to answer even *remotely* honestly. He needs to brush it off, maybe season it with a bit of a believable kind of lie— ‘I have no fucking clue, as I said, he was absolutely *wasted* at the time. Don’t even know if he knew it was *me* he was going after.’

‘Wow—’ Harrington repeats. ‘Wow man, I’m sorry he did that— though nowhere near as sorry as *he* is, I imagine— not that I have to be sorry. Not for him. Not *anymore*—’ the brunet trails off, frowning.

He doesn’t like that look. He *does not like* that look. ‘Forget that *bastard*,’ he hisses, then clears his throat. ‘Come on, I could do with a cigarette too—’

They lurk in the parking lot near the beemer while they smoke— and

he tries to ignore the way the cylinder trembles a little in the brunet's hand. The way Harrington's body seems all curled into itself, hunched down— the guy's maybe an inch taller than him, but the brunet does not look it right now. *Jesus—*

He is really not sorry he broke Tommy H.'s face.

Eventually Harrington goes back to being Harrington, all smiles and helpfulness, happy to stop at the 7-11 so he can pick up some more cigarettes— offering to pay again, but he declines— *again*. He leaves the brunet in the car to go in and get the smokes— finding that hot girl behind the counter that was there last time— still completely indifferent to his attempts at flirting.

'What happened to the guy who used to work here?' he asks her, leaning on the counter and watching her absence of interest in watching back. 'Dark haired guy. Bad attitude—'

She scoffs, giving him a *look* with oddly familiar grey eyes, but then, 'Got scared off by some Russian guy. I swear, this town gets weirder every year— that all?' she glances at the carton of Marlboros.

'That's all,' he sighs. Yep. No joy. The chick, this— he peers at her nametag— *Candice*.

Candice?

Fucking *Candy*? She does not look like a Candy.

Dark hair, grey eyes, fucking *sneering* at him now. Candys always seem like they should be blonde and tan and— you know— *flirty*. A bit dumb. 'Your parents really weren't clairvoyant, were they *Candy*?' slips out.

She rolls her eyes. 'Someone once told you good looks were enough to make up for a shitty personality, didn't they? Hate to break it to you, but—'

'Well, at least you think I'm handsome,' he replies with a wink.

She makes a disgusted noise— which makes him laugh and her frown. Funny, he doesn't even remotely care that his charms are

failing on this girl— it would have been a bit of fun to flirt for a while, but he's got to get back to Harrington and then they've got to go and stop the kids from being as stupid as they can be.

On impulse he grabs a packet of cherry Twizzlers, thinking vaguely of Max, vaguely of Harrington's coral lips, and plonks it down on the counter— making Candy sigh and amend the total. He waves her goodbye as he struts out to the car, chucking the candy onto Harrington's lap once the door's shut.

'What's—?' the guy asks, picking up the Twizzlers.

He shrugs. 'Got them for Max, thought you might like one before she gets her hands on them and they're gone.'

'Ah, *thanks*,' the brunet says, ripping open the packet carefully, handing it out to him first— he waves it off— before getting one out and sticking it between his lips as he pulls out from the 7-11.

Fucking—

Yeah. That's the kind of colour of his mouth. Not *pink* pink.

It turns out that the shitbirds are already at Harrington's house when they get there, already in the backyard, already standing over the pool— 'I told you guys I wouldn't be back until *three*,' Harrington sighs, handing the Twizzlers to Max— who immediately shoves one in her gob and offers the packet to El and then Erica.

'And it's ten past *two*, yet here you are,' Squawky responds. 'I see you brought Billy—'

He hears Wheeler Jr and Sinclair muttering between themselves about why *he's* here. 'Why do you *think*?' Harrington interrupts them. 'Because you're all reckless *idiots* and he's scarier than I am so you might actually listen to *him*—' the brunet shoots him an apologetic smile, making it clear that's not a *criticism*.

'He's not *scary*,' Wheeler mutters. 'I'm not scared of him—' he gives the kid a *look* and enjoys the way he backs up a step, reflexively. He'd include *Sinclair* in the look— but all of a sudden he's remembering what Harrington said in the car that night.

He really should apologize to the kid— not for any of the shit he’s given him after. He’s seen the boy’s eyes on Max’s ass, after all, but for— yeah.

Maybe later.

He greets Max and El and Erica, and nods in acknowledgement to the little Byers kid— whose eyes are *huge* and fixed on the water. Kid looks *scared*— he’d hope the others know what they’re doing, but he knows they *don’t*, so—

They really don’t. They hang around the edge of the water— where it feels cold and the air’s all *wrong*— staring into the pool, then El confirms that’s where Barb’s body is, then they discuss the fact that that’s where Barb’s body is, then they discuss the fact that El’s powers still aren’t working, and then they all decide to go inside and turn the TV on to static to *confirm* El’s powers aren’t working— which makes him worry and kind of, he will admit, maybe, *hover* a bit— but of course her powers *don’t* work, so then they decide someone is going to have to get in the pool and have a look.

‘No,’ is his firm opinion on the matter. Shared by Harrington.

Do the kids accept “no” as an answer? Of fucking course not.

Do things very quickly get very, *very* stupid? Of fucking course they do.

Does Harrington start to get worn down by their squawking and the worry one of them’s about to launch themselves into his pool and *die*? Of fucking course he does.

Does the brunet then volunteer to be the one to get in the gross, creepy, *wrong* pool? Of fucking—

Anyway. End result is he *tells* the other guy that it’s not happening and that *he’ll* do it instead.

Harrington tries to protest, *tries*, but, well— It’s kind of annoying having to get back into his swim trunks so soon after changing back into his jeans, huddled in the little downstairs powder room even though part of him had thought, maybe, Harrington would let him

change in the brunet's room.

He hesitates, just a little, hand on the doorknob, all too aware that, yes, he is wearing a muscle t, and yes, he is planning on climbing in the pool with it on, but— The scars are not fading. Not that he'd really expect them to, it hasn't been very long, but—

He has to be careful, careful in a way he never has before, because even the idea of what Max would look like if she saw the bullet holes — and she'd *ask*, no way would she let him deflect or anything— Yeah. So far he's trusting Squawky and Erica— and *Robin*— to keep their mouths shut without extracting the kind of promise Harrington was so free to give. But he is also very much aware he's trusting *Squawky and Erica and Robin*— and the most he's got on his side is the thought they might be— at least a *little*— scared of him. Yeah. The intimidation factor is pretty much all he's got going for him right now.

Head up, shoulders back, the very fucking *picture* of a man who knows *exactly* what he's doing, he heads back out to the pool.

'You don't have to do this,' is what Harrington greets him with. 'It's— it's— I mean, I don't know for sure it's *dangerous*, but it might be, and if it is my bat's—' the brunet gestures with his head to that fuck-awful bat Maxine almost took his balls off with, leaning oh-so-innocently against one of the lounges next to the water '—only going to be so much use—'

'As long as you're aiming it at *anything other than me*,' he says, eying the fucking thing like it's about to leap at his throat. '*That* is your bat? Jesus *Christ* Harrington—'

'You-can-call-me-Steve-if-you-want—?' the brunet says like it's one word, completely out of nowhere and with nothing to do with anything else that's happening— which must be why he chokes on his own spit.

Once he has managed to regain his dignity he very carefully says— ignoring the rasp in his voice from his own body betraying him and just trying to fucking *murder him*— 'I'll be fine—' his voice fucking *cracks*, Jesus. '—*Steve*.'

He hears Max snort from somewhere behind him, but when he turns to look at her she's looking all innocent— even though El and that Wheeler kid are giving her *what the fuck* looks. 'Twizzler?' she offers, holding out the sadly deflated packet.

'Do *you* want one—' again he hesitates, the brunet's name coming out a bit— *weird*— again, even though he's not choking this time. '— Steve?'

A fraction of a pause, brown eyes on his face, *something* in them, then the brunet smiles at Max, and sticks out a hand, 'Sure.'

He goes over to the water's edge while Harring— *Steve*. Steve, Steve, Steve, Steve, Steve, Steve, *Steve*— is slipping the red rope of candy between his lips. The air is still *cold*, still *weird*, still *wrong*, and he almost thinks there's a scent there, something *familiar*.

'If something gets me I'm holding you shitbirds responsible,' he calls out, then jumps in.

—

And it's fine. The water's *cold*, colder than it should be since the day is hot and this seems like a heated pool anyway, but *nothing* happens to him. He just bobs back up to the surface and looks up at the kids and a worried looking Steve.

'No monsters?' Squawky calls out.

'No monsters,' he replies, 'but I'll dive down, see if that changes.'

'Be careful!' Steve calls moments before he submerges his oddly warm face in the cold water.

His unexplained added weight makes diving down easy, but doesn't change the fact that once he's in it Harrington's gross pool seems to just be a *pool*. There's no sign of the Upside Down, just the walls and the floor and lights and drains and the *pool* parts of the pool— No dead Barbara Holland, no rot, no *monsters*—

By the time he climbs out he is *shivering* though. He feels almost frozen. The water really is *unnaturally* cold, but that's about all he

can say.

He tells the kids this, watches them frown and start squabbling about what it *means*, arms wrapped around his waist, skin pebbled with goosebumps, the heat of the day making his chilly body feel sluggish and weird.

‘Ok,’ Steve says, frowning at him. ‘I think you need a warm shower and to get changed into some dry clothes, you look—’ the brunet reaches out, a little hesitantly, and touches his arm before pulling it back. ‘Jesus Billy, you are *freezing*.’

After he’s fetched his clothes the brunet pretty much shoos him into the house and upstairs, getting a towel and ushering him into what is apparently *Steve’s* own, personal, bathroom— ‘You can use my shampoo and stuff if you want,’ the guy says and just— *leaves him there*.

12. Chapter 12

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For homophobic language, and some references to child abuse.

Um. Well, Billy is Billy I guess. And in this case an oblivious creep. But, yeah. Another chapter! Thank you all for reading, and for the comments and kudos. I wonder what you'll think of this one...

Fuck. The room itself smells like Harrington. Like his hair products, his soap, that *cologne*—

His gaze catches on another door, same as the one he just came through from the hall, and his mind is thinking *that's probably Steve's bedroom* and *he could just walk over there and*— but. No. *Shower*. He's here to shower.

And, yeah, ok, he *does* maybe have a look around, opening drawers and the cupboard behind the mirror above the sink— He finds the cologne, a bottle with maybe a quarter used. *Annick Goutal, Sables*— Never heard of it. Either the brand or the fragrance in question.

Looks posh though. And French.

He raises the thing to his nose and breathes in— definitely Steve's cologne, but it doesn't quite smell so good by itself— probably needs body warmth to really bring it out.

He very carefully puts it back, closes the cupboard door, then goes and turns on the shower. For a moment he just stands there, under the warm water— the water pressure's— *Well*, the water pressure at home is ok, not *great*, but ok, but here— fucking fancy-ass expensive fucking shower with some *massage* shower head or something. It's good.

Fuck, one day he's going to get the kind of job that means he can

afford to put a shower like this one in his house— when he has a house.

He lathers up his hair with Steve's fucking *Faberge Organics* shampoo — and yeah, that smells like Steve too— and—

His fucking dick's getting hard.

Well, he is in a shower— a real fucking *nice* shower— and he's warmed up now, and he's still kind of *frustrated* from the night before, and—

It would be weird, wouldn't it? Jerking off in Steve's shower.

Yeah. Not cool— not *cool at all*—

He keeps washing himself, hoping it'll go down— Conditioner smells like Steve too— same with that fancy-ass soap— *it's not going down*. He can't stay in the shower forever— someone will come looking for him and find him standing around awkwardly with a hardon.

It's not *that* weird, is it? Like, *Steve* must jack it in this shower all the time. As far as he knows pretty much every guy does— maybe not in this *exact* shower— but in the shower in general. Jerking off in the shower is perfectly normal and natural and probably actually healthy and a practice with good hygiene and—

He squirts a little of Steve's conditioner into his palm and goes to town, breathing apologies to the guy the entire time that he'll never say out loud. His thoughts are a whirl of long legs and brown hair and brown eyes and when he comes it's like a punch in the gut, body hunching over convulsively, face resting helplessly on the arm he has pressed against the tiled wall of the shower.

After he pants for a moment, eyes catching on the streak of cum he's left on those same tiles, before he makes himself straighten up and wipe it off, cupping water from the shower head to splash it away.

—

Not his proudest moment.

—
What would Ste—

Nope. Never thinking about that. Not even considering the guy finding out he just jacked off in his shower and then deciding he's a creep and wanting nothing to do with him—

What if the other guy can smell it? Ok. Ok—

He quickly re-washes himself with all of the brunet's shower products, frothing everything up so they let off as much fragrance as possible.

Why is his dick twitching again? Jesus fucking *Christ* you'd think the thing would be satisfied already.

It must be the warm, comfortable shower— So he turns off the taps and climbs out, grabbing that towel Steve left for him and wrapping himself in it— almost *moaning* at the fluffy softness of the thing. *What the fuck kind of towel even is this?* Nothing like the thin, barely absorbent things his dad always insists they buy.

Fucking rich, posh—

He can't even bring himself to be resentful. Steve's too good a guy to resent for being born in the lap of this kind of luxury.

He dresses quickly, bundling up his swim trunks and soaked muscle t to take home later, then leaves the brunet's bathroom, heading back downstairs even though he kind of wants to have a look around up here, maybe have a look inside Steve's bedroom—

When he gets down there he finds the kids have migrated to the den and Robin has appeared from somewhere. 'I miss anything?' he asks after stuffing the bundle of trunks and top in his bag to take home—

For some reason he's having trouble meeting Steve's eyes—

'It's not a gate—' is the answer, spoken with absolute confidence by Squawky. '—and we all agree if the Mind Flayer was loose again Will would be able to sense it, so we think it's just—' a shrug.

‘A weak point,’ the Wheeler kid says and they all nod, before Squawky goes on.

‘Right, a *weak point*, between *this* world and the *Upside Down*.’

‘So it’s probably not dangerous,’ Max adds.

‘Unless a gate opens again—’ the little Byers says, ‘then, I think—’

‘Yeah, *then* it might be dangerous—’ Max again.

And then it just descends into nerdery that he has no interest in. The gist is that none of them think whatever’s wrong with Steve’s pool is likely to do anything to anyone right now, but it might later, so Steve is now charged with the scared duty of keeping an eye on it and updating everyone the moment things change.

‘Kind of an anti-climax,’ Robin laughs, body bumping the brunet, ‘Not that I wanted to see some scary, fleshy, *monstrosity* climb out of your pool, but this town’s got my expectations all turned around.’

He catches Max looking at the girl the way he suspects he is, with a look of *consideration*. Funny, thinking that maybe she’s a dyke seems to make her less irritating— she’s probably trying too hard to seem *normal*, and that’s probably what he and Max were picking up on that was annoying them.

With the pool drama investigated and out of the way he’s thinking that maybe the kids will want to go home, or possibly watch something on that fucking *expensive looking* twenty-six inch TV set, but instead Squawky takes out what looks like a deck of cards and proudly declares that he’s been doing some research and that he made them.

Why that should be a thing to bother telling people he has no idea, especially as it doesn’t look like the things are like normal playing cards. They’ve got weird shapes on them— ‘Oh,’ Steve says, peering at them, ‘You’re going to do the party trick?’

‘Huh?’ Squawky frowns at him for a moment before shaking his head, ‘What? No. They’re *Zener Cards*. You use them to test people for ESP. I thought maybe El could practise with them— maybe they’d help her

get her powers back.'

She doesn't seem convinced, says something about *Papa* and using them before but them not really working the way they're supposed to and then something about not being able to *read minds*. Apparently Squawky has a way around all that— or at least his idea is for someone—*probably Squawky himself*— to go to the far end of the house away from the den and read out what's on the cards while she tries to pick it up on a walky-talky.

After a bunch of squawking, some *for* and some *against*, this plan Squawky goes marching off into the depths of the Harrington residence without even *asking* Steve where he's allowed to go, and the rest of them are left looking at an awkward and uncomfortable looking El. Wheeler Jr. isn't completely awful for once since he tells her she doesn't have to do this if she doesn't want to, but she says she does want to— with a look to *him* to see if he's ok with it— and honestly he's not *sure*, but it doesn't look like it could be dangerous— before she nods, sits on the floor, and blindfolds herself— because apparently she just has one of those on her all the time now.

They all sit around watching, waiting—

Absolutely *nothing* happens and keeps happening for at least fifteen minutes, while El seems more and more dispirited and the Wheeler kid seems to be getting more and more *stressed out*— before Squawky's voice comes bellowing down the halls. 'Is it working?'

Erica goes out to bellow back that, 'No it is not. Seems your stupid plan *is*, actually, *stupid*—'

The kids all start hollering about what they could try to do different, and then Steve says something about it maybe being the *deck*, like, if they used *real cards* instead—

'No offense Steve, but the thought that it's the *deck* is just— it's *stupid*. You know absolutely *nothing* about any of this, so you're *not helping*—' the Wheeler kid starts, tone nasty, all *condescending* as fuck.

He sees Steve flinch, just a little, not enough that he thinks anyone else notices, but *he* notices, and he's just about to lurch off the couch

and give the little *shit* a talking to for speaking to the brunet like that, but Max is flinging herself at him, pushing him back into his seat with both hands against his chest. ‘Don’t be such a *dick* Mike,’ she snaps, still holding him in place.

‘What did I say?’ the dark-haired kid whines. ‘I didn’t say *anything*— He really doesn’t *know anything*—’

‘You know what?’ Steve says, voice perfectly calm and pleasant, ‘You’re right, I’ve got nothing to add— So I might as well go get started on dinner, yeah? Call out if any of you need anything—’

He watches the brunet go, temper fraying. ‘You know what you are kid?’ he says to Wheeler Jr. once Steve’s out of the room. ‘You’re a *turd*.’

‘*What?*’ the kid whines again, ‘*What did I say that was so wrong?*’

‘Steve’s just trying to help and you were a *dick* to him,’ Max says, giving him a warning *look* before carefully backing away, keeping an eye on him like he’s going to lurch out of his seat and strangle the black haired boy right in front of everyone.

‘A *complete* dick,’ El adds, looking unimpressed.

The kid carries on for a bit, whining about what he said not being so bad and the fact that it wasn’t like a *lie*— even though the boy must be able to tell he’s well and truly outnumbered. He’s just thinking of going after Steve, seeing if the brunet really is upset or something, when Squawky shows up and asks what he missed.

‘Mike was a dick to Steve so Steve went to make dinner,’ Max informs him.

‘What?’ Squawky turns his attention to Wheeler Jr. ‘Mike, *what did you do?*’

‘Nothing!’ the kid yelps, degenerating into self-defensive babbling.

‘Well, as *fun* as this is—’ Robin says, getting out of her lounge chair, ‘I think I might go hang around with Stevie. Squabbling fourteen-year-olds aren’t really my *scene*.’

A moment later he follows, lingering to just remind the Wheeler boy that he's a 'turd' before finding his way to the kitchen. '—it's *fine*. *Seriously*. My feelings are far too robust to be hurt by *Mike Wheeler*—all I was going to say is that I have a proper deck around here somewhere if they want to use it—' he hears the brunet sigh.

A pause. 'Why do *you* have a deck of— Zemer? Zener? Zenar?—whatever-they're-called cards?'

He enters the room to see Steve shrug, 'I dunno. My uncle left them at some point when I was a kid— Billy! Do you need something?'

'Can I use the phone?' He really should try to talk to Susan— or at least leave a message or something. The thought of coming home to an enraged Neil again— *Not* appealing.

No one's home, but he leaves a message on the machine saying both him and Max will be at a friend's place for dinner. When he hangs up the wall phone he gets out his cigarettes and gestures to the back door, heading out to pace back and forth by the creepy pool and smoke after Steve nods in acknowledgement.

Fucking Wheeler kid— *None of them* have any idea how good they've got it with someone like Steve around. Nice and helpful and rich and, fucking, *considerate*— Kid's a brat. That's what he is. Hard to see *Karen* as his mother— but maybe he takes after her blob of a husband. Maybe, once, a fucking *long, long* time ago Mr. Wheeler the reclining *lump* was skinny and active and fucking *bitchy as hell*. As far as he can see the thought isn't any more appealing than the thing the man's turned into in his old age.

Still doesn't get it. Fucking sexy woman like that—

None of his fucking business though, is it? That ship has more than sailed—

For a moment he expects to regret it, right here right now, so soon after the Chelsea disaster— Karen Wheeler would *not* give anyone such an indifferent handjob, no way— but he *doesn't*. Karen's more fantasy than flesh. He finds he wouldn't mind a bit of *flesh* right now, someone warm and sweet who feels *good* in his arms—

‘—NT TO RIDE MY BICYCLE! I WANT TO RIDE MY BIKE!’ comes absolutely fucking *roaring* out of the house, making him drop his cigarette in the fucking *pool*.

‘I WANT TO RIDE MY BICYCLE! I WANT TO RIDE IT WHERE I LIKE —’

What the everloving *fuck*?

Back in the kitchen he finds Steve, Robin, and *Erica* of all people giggling while *bellowing* along with Queen being played on the little tape deck on the counter. He’s in time for ‘YOU SAY SHARK, I SAY HEY MAN JAWS WAS NEVER MY SCENE AND I DON’T LIKE *STAR WARS*—’ the last bit emphasised and causing a brand new fit of giggles.

‘Hey!’ he can hear from somewhere deeper in the house. Squawky. ‘All nerds love Star Wars Erica!’

‘Nuh-uh!’ she bellows back. ‘That is not true. Star Wars is *lame*!’

This is apparently some dark spell that will summon annoying nerd boys— or at least *Squawky*— to the kitchen to argue about the various merits of those dumb fucking movies— and, ok, yeah. Carrie Fisher is *hot*, but—

Robin and Steve collapse into incoherent giggles, leaning on each other for a moment, before the brunet pulls away. ‘Cookies anyone? I was thinking of making some more chocolate chip—’

‘Nuh-uh,’ Robin replies, shaking her head. ‘*Oatmeal raisin* or something. You are *spoiling those children Stevie*, they will grow up expecting amazing cookies to just appear out of nowhere and then where will they be? Living a life of constant disappointment. Unable to function in a society where most cookies are no more than *sub par*.’

‘You say that like I don’t know you like oatmeal raisin,’ the brunet says with a twitch of his brow and smile just for her.

‘You two are *gross*,’ Erica says. ‘It’s bad enough watching *Lucas* with *Max*— and how did my brother get a girl like that? That’s what I want to know.’

He spots the slightly awkward look between Steve and Robin, wonders if it's proof of his *she's a dyke pretending to be his girlfriend* theory, but then the chick shakes her head and says, 'We're not dating,' gesturing between herself and the brunet, 'We're just friends.'

'Best friends,' Steve adds.

Robin nods. 'Absolutely *best* friends.'

'Uh-huh,' Erica says, giving them a *look* which says exactly how much she believes them. So, yeah, basically *not at all*. Which is funny, because even though Robin just blew his theory out of the fucking water, he finds *he* believes them. Friends.

So they're friends— but *what does that mean?*

Is that evidence *for* or *against* Steve being a faggot?

Fuck knows.

13. Chapter 13

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't think there are any trigger warnings for this chapter, which feels weird, so I've probably missed one. As always please let me know if you think I need to add any.

Yay another chapter. Hope you all enjoy! Thank you all, so much, for reading and for the comments and kudos!

Because whatever they are Steve is obviously a pushover for Robin the cookies end up being oatmeal raisin. Which he'd bitch about more, because who the fuck likes *oatmeal raisin*? but the end result is —fucking *oatmeal raisin* cookies should not be this good. Holy shit, Robin was not lying, Steve can fucking *cook*.

He does not moan around the still warm morsel of deliciousness in his mouth— but it's a near thing. Fucking embarrassing, yeah. Jesus fucking *Christ* how can Steve cook like this?

'These are fucking *amazing*,' slips out even though it's kind of— yeah. Uncool. Acting like an idiot over *cookies* of all things—

The statement earns him a pleased smile, the words, 'It's my Grandma's recipe. I *think*— I mean, I only saw her make them a couple of times, but they *tasted* like these ones do, so I think it's right —' and *another cookie*, before Steve puts a bunch on a plate to deliver to the kids— now *all* in the den, and making the kind of noises that makes him suspect they've given up on psychic experiments and have resorted to watching nerdy TV.

Robin steals one from the plate as the brunet walks past, leaning back against the counter where she's been leaning the entire time, and *looking* at him. He doesn't get it. What that look means— there's assessment there, she's *judging him*, but he's not sure *why*.

He cocks a brow at her and leans back against the opposite counter,

which makes her roll her eyes and blow out a breath. ‘What?’ he snaps.

‘Getting a bit domestic there, aren’t you Hargrove?’ she asks between bites. ‘Aren’t you worried easing up on your asshole act will turn you into a loser like the rest of us?’

‘*Steve’s* not a loser,’ he points out.

‘Not sure most of the idiots of Hawkins High would agree with you there.’

‘Like their opinion matters,’ he scoffs. ‘Anyway, thought he was your *friend*.’

‘Oh, he is,’ she replies, ‘Just didn’t think he was *yours*.’

For a moment he wants to protest, feels like she thinks being so fond of the brunet *makes* him a loser, but— Actually— a few nightmares, a lot of lost sleep, and some other —*concerns*— aside— he’s probably as content as he’s been in years, and *Steve* is part of that.

From the den he can hear the sound of the kids carrying on, first excited about cookies, then whining about them being oatmeal raisin — then Steve laughing at them and saying if they don’t want oatmeal raisin cookies he can just *take them back*— which makes them start panicking and apologising and saying *oatmeal raisin’s ok as long as it’s not too often and sometimes a change is good* and then Wheeler Jr.’s frantic voice going on about how he’s sorry he *was a dick he didn’t mean it and he won’t do it again just give us back the cookies, please Steve!*

He shrugs, glances back at Robin, ‘Yeah. Well, guy grows on you. He’s— Yeah. He is not the guy I thought he was when we first moved here.’

She snorts a laugh. ‘Weird, but I know *exactly* what you mean. For, like, *the longest time* I thought he was just another *asshole* like Carol or Tommy H.’

‘I fucking *hate* that guy,’ he spits out before he realises he’s going to.

A twitch of her brow. 'I thought *he* was your friend?'

He shakes his head. Fuck, now he wants a cigarette— 'Nope. Started hanging around me when we first moved to town, talking *shit* in my ear— He's a fucking *parasite*, that's what he is— Wish I'd seen it then.' If he had maybe he would have told the guy to fuck off and given *King Steve* a chance instead. He'd probably have been *happier* that way—

Not that Steve would have given *him* a chance, not with the way he was treating Max back then. Fuck he was a *dick* to her. *Jesus*. It took her almost taking off his balls to make him see sense—

It took him waking up realising he'd almost *killed* the brunet—

He realises Robin's looking at him in a way that's different from her usual look of— *whatever it is*. Dislike. Mild disgust— this is a more *friendly* version of that considering look she sometimes gives him.

Steve trots back into the room a moment later, sans cookie plate. 'You two want another cookie before I get started on dinner?'

He isn't going to agree, except he has before he thinks about it, accepting yet another perfect, warm, *moist*— *Jesus*. Eating like this is not going to be good for his waistline. It's something to see *Robin's* in the same predicament.

While they're both stuffing their faces Steve turns the tape deck back on, humming along to a mix tape of mainly *weird* Queen songs as he gets started making homemade mac and cheese. Once she's finished her cookie Robin joins him, singing the lyrics with a surprisingly good voice.

The two of them are just—

'*Fie-fo Black Queen, marching single file—*'

Fuck his life is *insane*.

He goes back out to the pool for another cigarette— It's funny, now he's used to the cold air, the *wrong* scent of it, the strange, *uneasy* feeling of the place, it doesn't really bother him that much. He almost

feels *comfortable*— Though it is fucking *unnerving* when he catches movement out of the corner of his eye but looks and sees *nothing* down there. Still— Worse and weirder things have happened recently.

The kids decide they're going to be allowed to eat dinner in front of the TV— and, of course, Steve doesn't protest— doesn't even protest when they— or mainly *Squawky*, offended about certain statements concerning Star Wars earlier— decide that's what they'll all be watching. The first one. Fuck, he does not even care what the thing's called other than *Star Wars*. He remembers when it was *just* Star Wars.

He claims one of the armchairs. Erica claims the other. Steve and Robin and the little Byers boy— on Steve's insistence when El makes it clear she wants to sit with Max and the Wheeler kid— take the couch— with the rest of the kids all lolling around on the carpeted floor in front of the TV set.

Of course the movie's barely started when Squawky starts going on about his imaginary girlfriend and how much she likes Star Wars— because *all nerds like Star Wars Erica*— and then Max interrupts with something about this "Susie" being *hotter than Phoebe Cates* and how she doesn't think *Phoebe Cates is that hot, is she Robin?*

And he's thinking *what the fuck?* But then Max is going on about how Carrie Fisher is really hot as Leia and *you know she's not wearing a bra under that white dress, don't you?* 'What do you think Robin, is Phoebe Cates or Carrie Fisher hotter?'

And then, while the chick in question is going bright red and stuttering, Max starts listing other women she says are hotter than Phoebe Cates— Like Sigourney Weaver and Sean Young and Joan Jett and Michelle Pfeifer in Scarface— and when did she even *see* Scarface?— and it seems like half the girls at Hawkins High— and he's just starting to wonder if Max is a dyke too, when he realises the constant 'What do you think Robin?'s are her attempting to work out if he was right about the chick.

Smart move Max.

For her part Robin just gets redder and redder under the barrage of names of hot chicks and reasons they're hot. Sitting next to her on the couch Steve looks like he's torn between finding this hilarious and starting to get a bit protective— and Squawky looks like he's about to have a *fit*.

The kid starts squawking at Max about her being a *girl* and thus not allowed to have an opinion on which girls are hotter than Phoebe Cates— which gets Max calling him *sexist*— and then he appeals to Steve to help, wanting the brunet to agree that the relative hotness of girls is a *guy interest* not a *girl interest*.

'I'm sorry man, but I'm pretty sure telling a girl she's not allowed to have an opinion on something because she's a *girl* is, actually, pretty much the definition of sexist,' is the brunet's reply. 'Also, you know, aesthetics are aesthetics— *Hot's* hot— and I don't think you can really say girls aren't allowed to have an opinion about girls unless you're willing to say the same about *guys*— and don't think I've forgotten you whining about how you don't get why everyone thinks Ralf Macchio is that hot.'

'You're supposed to be on *my side*, Steve!' Squawky complains, to which Steve just shrugs.

A moment later the brunet shoulder bumps Robin— who is still an amazing colour of scarlet— and says, quietly, 'You want to help me in the kitchen for a moment—'

When they're gone Max and he exchange a *look* while Squawky is still squawking. Yep highly likely Robin is a dyke, also likely Steve knows, and probable that the brunet is considerate enough that he wants to give her a chance to compose herself after Max embarrassed her like that.

What it all means though—?

For the rest of the movie he does his best not to think about Carrie Fisher's tits bouncing around unconfined— or why Max knows that. Girls are— Anyone who tells you girls are sweet and innocent and know nothing about things like that has probably never met one that wasn't *amazingly sheltered*. Mind you, even the sheltered ones can be

pretty—

Yeah.

He has had some *very weird sex* with sheltered girls— but maybe that's sheltered *Cali* girls. Hawkins girls have been a bit more *tame* in his experience. Catholic schoolgirls, man—

Mid-movie Steve starts getting twitchy— mind you he's *feeling* a bit twitchy too, they probably all are, since Squawky won't stop telling Erica why each scene is amazing, what each character must be thinking based on a whole bunch of bullshit not included in the actual film itself, providing all sorts of random crap facts no one needs to know, and essentially inadvertently sabotaging his own campaign to convince the girl of the merits of the stupid fucking film series.

Ok. Yeah. Star Wars is actually pretty entertaining, but less so with Squawky— *squawking* the whole time.

'How about I get some more cookies?' Steve finally breaks and asks. 'Cookies would be good, right? Everyone wants cookies? Ok. Good.'

He could swear he hears the guy muttering something about "Oh my God shut up Dustin before you make *everyone* hate Star Wars" to himself as he leaves, but he thinks he might be the only one.

There is almost a moment of peace, but then Squawky starts up again. Before he can drag himself out of his chair to go join Steve in the kitchen to get away from this fucking kid the brunet's back, plate of cookies in hand. The kids start making grabby hands, but Steve offers the plate to Robin and Will first— arguing with the other kids when they insist he hurry up— then taking it around to Erica, before bringing it over to *him*. 'Take as many as you want,' the brunet advises, 'Because they'll be gone the moment those greedy little shits get them.'

He leans forward to take a couple, picking two of the bigger, raisinier, cookies— but as he does he gets a whiff of the brunet's cologne, the smell of his shampoo and conditioner and soap, and his brain goes *I jacked off in his shower* and *Carrie Fisher* and *tits* and

something and he feels his dick *twitch*. He grunts, quietly, but does his best to ignore his swelling dick. If he shifts or readjusts himself it'll be noticeable—

Fuck his tight jeans.

Ok. Yeah. He's probably going to have to choose to wear his briefs for longer than it takes to keep his dick hidden during the walk from the bathroom to his bedroom or something the way things are going recently.

Sitting back as naturally as he can he looks up, about to suggest Steve make sure he gets some cookies for himself before handing them over to the ravening hoard— but those brown eyes are dark and velvety and for a split second he gets *caught* in them—

'Cookies Steve!' Squawky demands.

The brunet jumps a little, gives him a real fucking *nervous* smile, then takes a cookie for himself before handing the plate to El— the most patient of the cookieless children.

Jesus fucking Christ—

Max has scored herself an invite to sleepover with El at the Byers house— which is apparently where her and the Chief are living now — though where they're going to fit her he has no idea— which she brings up after the movie's over and the kids are starting to make noises about going home. 'When did that happen?' he asks, because he can't remember hearing any of them talk about it.

'I think you were outside smoking—' she replies. 'It was sometimes when Steve and Robin were singing the Flash Gordon song—'

'Queen really is a *nerd* band,' Erica adds.

Steve starts arguing with that assertion, but Erica is firm. Queen is a nerd band. Steve likes Queen. Steve is a nerd. *Everyone's* a nerd— other than *him*— but the way she says that makes him think maybe that's not a compliment.

Anyway, he tells Max she's allowed to stay over with El if it's ok with

1. Chief Hopper. 2. Mrs Byers. 3. Susan— so she has to go use the phone while he gets to watch Steve Harrington get roundly schooled on his nerd status by a ten-year-old girl.

Max comes back triumphant— the end result of which is— after the other kids have been picked up or rode off on their bikes (or driven off in her mom's car, in the case of Robin)— he and Max and El and the little Byers boy all get ushered into Steve's car so he can drop the rest of them off at the creepy Byers place with a tin of cookies for Mrs. Byers— where he tries to ignore Chief Hopper looking at him from the front window as he pulls Max aside to make sure she'll be alright if she has a nightmare, to which she responds that she's pretty sure both El and the little Byers kid have them too, so it should be fine— before Steve starts off all the way across town just to drop him and Max's bike off.

He can't think of anything to say, but that seems ok. The two of them falling into a comfortable silence, broken only by the brunet humming along to the pop songs on the radio. The guy's voice is pleasant— don't get him wrong, he's no *Freddie Mercury*, the brunet's not likely to be winning any record deals anytime soon, but still, *pleasant*. A good voice for lullabies, if that makes sense. Sweet and smooth— though without Robin's surprising *range*.

They part with Steve confirming what time he wants to be picked up to be dropped off at the pool in the morning, before he lingers outside to smoke and watch the burgundy beemer drive away. It's dark, both inside and outside the house— no lights left on for him, though he can see light shining under Neil and Susan's door.

He gets ready for bed— hoping for once he can sleep and won't dream— and lies down, light off, closing his eyes and—

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

14. Chapter 14

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for mentions of suicide, oblique mentions of child abuse, possibly others. Let me know if I've missed any.

Just thought i should let everyone know that I may not be able to update as often as usual over the next month- busy, I'm afraid- I am aiming for once a week, but I might have to miss a week, maybe two, depending. Things are a bit up in the air right now. Anyway, thank you all so much as always for reading, for the comments and the kudos, and I hope you're all having a good time for this time of year!

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

He jolts awake in the backseat of his baby. For a moment he's disorientated, confused— it's not— something's— he blinks, raises his hands and rubs at his eyes and looks around.

Well *shit*.

Outside drifts of crap are falling from an eternally black sky.

He takes a deep breath, pulling in cold, stale air, the smell of the place, before climbing out of the car and looking around properly. Yep. He is on the side of the road near the phonebox, Brimborn Steelworks just up there—

Someone's laughing.

Though— *are they*? They could be crying. There's a strange, wheezing edge to the sound—

He can't see them. He can't see anything but this place and the rot and the darkness—

'You see, *I'm already dead*—' a voice echoes strangely around him. A punchline to a joke he missed the beginning of— 'I thought this was it. I thought— you know, in stories, the way the bad guy can *redeem himself*, right before the end— I thought *this was my end*. But it's not. I just—*keep going*—' and then the laughter starts up again—

Oh.

Oh no.

No no no no no no no no no no no nonononononononooooooooo—

He knows that voice. Of fucking *course* he knows that voice. He's lived with that voice every Goddamn day of his Goddamn life—

‘—So, turns out throwing myself off the top of the school won’t work either. Tell you what Dead Girl, this afterlife business sure ain’t what it’s cracked up to be—’

Dead Girl. ‘Steve’s gross pool,’ he breathes to himself, lurching back to the car, turning the key in the ignition the moment he has the door closed. Nothing happens.

When he pops the hood he finds the fibrous rot of the place has infiltrated into the engine over the days since—

His voice is laughing again, sounding well and truly *cracked*. ‘You’re right, I wasn’t serious— at least I don’t think I was. Who the fuck knows? I don’t know. I have no fucking clue what the fuck is going on—’

Fuck. Ok. Ok— He's just going to have to— No *fucking way* is he walking all the way across town— Maybe there's a gross, half rotten version of a bike around here somewhere? It seems like more than half the fucking town has bikes. Maybe *he* should get a bike—

Nope. Too far into *loser* territory— He may have made a few exploratory surveys into such unmapped regions recently, but there's no way he's going to throw himself in headfirst.

‘Yeah. If I could *find the asshole!*’ his voice is now shouting. ‘You hear me?! When I do I’m gonna— I don’t even fucking know *what!* But I fucking swear it’s going to *hurt*. And don’t go thinking you can just *kill me* to get rid of me— oh no. Fucking *immortal* over here you sack of *dicks*.’

No bike. No *nothing*— and there’s no fucking way he’s going into the Steelworks to look in there— so it looks like he’ll have to *walk*. Fucking *joy*.

Strolling through some nightmare version of this fucking town he hates is made even fucking *worse* by listening to himself having what sounds like a complete fucking nutcase *meltdown* somewhere just out of sight. His voice starts having hysterics about Max and El— and them being alive, but the voice having trouble convincing himself that they *are* alive and it’s not just a trick— as he starts off, and that’s bad enough, but then it starts going on about whether or not this is *hell* and then—

‘This is about Harrington, isn’t it?’ comes at a particularly low moment. ‘This is because I hurt him like that— Yeah. Yeah, that’s what it is— *You know I didn’t mean to*, I just lost my temper— I didn’t know he was such a *pussy*— All my life from fucking *Neil*. *Pussy*. You’re the pussy old man. You’re the *coward*. Fuck I *hate you*— Fucking *Harrington* too— pussy little *bitch*. Eyes and hair like a fucking *girl*—’

It’s— He doesn’t like the man he’s hearing. Not at all— and it just gets *worse*. Worse as he walks through the dead, so very *dead* town, the air full of shit that should hurt his lungs, make him cough, make him *choke*— but he breathes it as easy as pure, mountain air on a sunny day.

For a while it sounds like his voice is talking directly to— well, he *assumes* it’s the body of Barb Holland at the bottom of this version of Steve’s pool— Though by “*talking to*” what he really means is *being a dick to*. ‘You know— *no one cares what you think Dead Girl*. If they cared about you *at all* you wouldn’t be here, would you? They would have come and got you or something— Not left you here to *rot*.’

There is a pause. Poor dead Barb, if it is dead Barb the voice is

talking to— not that he thinks she'll care either way, she is *dead* after all, but the voice is being such a— but then it changes, softens, becomes more contemplative.

'Did you know him? Are you from around here? Or are you just some unlucky little bitch who fell through into hell from somewhere else? You a Cali girl? You even a girl at all? You look like you were a redhead—'

Something, part way between a rueful laugh and a sob, 'Fuck. I hope Max is ok.'

This is a dream, isn't it? He's sure— He's had dreams like this recently, hasn't he? Trapped here? The voice though— He's not sure, he can't remember. It feels familiar—

This is because they were investigating Steve's pool earlier, isn't it— That *was* earlier—

Wasn't it?

How long has he been here—

Not long. *Not long.*

He has to remember that.

'He always such a *bitch*, Harrington? Oh fuck, *I'm losing it*. This isn't— This *is not what was supposed to happen*. Go back, yeah, go back and fix it and then— just— I dunno. *Fade away.*'

It's almost like the voice belongs to that other him, the one that disappeared when the gate shut—Funny the way dreams work.

If it is just a dream why is he going to where he thinks the voice is? To Steve's pool? He could just stop. Just *rest* somewhere until he wakes up— His pace slows. There's not that much further now, just a few more streets— in reality the town isn't that big— There's plenty of places he could sit, smoke— except he has no cigarettes. Is wearing nothing but the loose pants he sleeps in to keep his dick to himself while living in his father's house.

‘Sometimes I think I can see him, *up there*— looking down at me, always looking down at me— hah! It’s just like being alive, being judged by Steve fucking *Harrington*—’ yep. Definitely *Steve’s pool*. ‘— He always did think he was better than me— the way he’d just *ignore me*—You know what, Dead Girl? I’m no faggot, not remotely interested— but it’d almost be worth proving fucking Neil right, that there is really something fucking *wrong* with me, to put that little *pussy* in his place—’ He stops entirely. Oh no. *No*. The voice is not about to—

‘The first time I ever— it was this girl, *Lynne*, she was *determined* to wear white at her wedding—’ From somewhere very far away he thinks that he remembers her— that he’s still kind of proud of the way he’d managed to get her to come even though he’d thought she wouldn’t be able to, considering where she’d insisted he— but the rage is rising up and swallowing most of his thoughts. Ok. *No*. No way. He knows where this is headed, and he does not give a *fuck* if it’s his own fucking voice talking—

‘I bet Harrington would squeak *just like her* with a dick up his ass—’ *Jesus Christ*. The voice actually said it out loud— He is going to— No one speaks about Steve like that. Not Tommy H. Not— Not *him*. No one. He is going to punch *his own* asshole face in.

Instead of strolling, instead of walking at a reasonable pace, he starts *running*. Sprinting towards Steve’s house, towards the voice that would dare to— Fucking *dick*. He’s going to— He’s going to—

His body moves easily, almost *flowing* along. Speed increasing past what it should be able to. Limbs seeming to *extend*—

Alarm bells start screaming in the back of his mind as awareness *shifts*. As his body *stretches*. Comes apart. Drops forward. As *more legs* start appearing— long and spindly and bony and *sharp*— so instead of running upright he’s skittering along like a giant— even more many-legged than usual— *spider*.

He vaguely registers starting up the Harringtons’ drive, skittering over the dark mirror image of Steve’s beemer, skidding around the side of the house, heading for the pool— He can see it, the edge of it, hear that voice— now sounding just up ahead, no longer echoing like

it was. ‘—*Fuck*, Listen to me— you know I don’t mean it Dead Girl. I’m just— I’m so fucking *sick* of this. I just want it to stop— or to change. Or *Something*. Anything. Anything other than— How long do you think I can stay trapped in here? No matter how hungry I get I just keep going, no matter how thirsty— I *can’t die*—’

He launches himself into the empty space of the pool, sees his own *blue* eyes widen, his own grimy, bedraggled form straighten up from his crouch by the remnants of the body, and then he’s—

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

15. Chapter 15

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For homophobic language and fear of homophobic reprisal. Let me know if I've missed any.

I've fallen into the bad habit of responding to comments when I've finished another chapter and am getting ready to post it, which I'm going to try not to do this time- in part because it feels kind of unappreciative, and I do appreciate you all, but also because I'm pretty sure I'm not going to have time to finish the next chapter in the coming week, so it might be two weeks before it gets posted. Anyway, on with the show- I hope you all enjoy, and thank you as always for reading, commenting and leaving likes!

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

It's freezing. He can't *breathe*. He—

He surfaces, limbs flailing, to the muffled sound of, 'no no no no no— *Billy?! Oh my God. Oh my God. Let me just—*' and the clatter of something hard skittering across concrete. A moment later a warm hand is grabbing at him and he looks up and it's *Steve* and—

He's in the guy's *pool*.

He launches himself at the edge, where the brunet is, grabbing at the concrete and *dragging* himself out of the water, helped along by Steve's warm hands on his cold flesh, pulling at him.

They land in a tangle at the edge of the water, him lying half across the guy's lap, shivering, shivering, heart *thundering* in his ears, trying

to catch his breath.

The brunet is so *warm*.

He's so cold.

'Fuck, fuck, fuck— Oh my God, does that hurt? Oh *God Billy*, that looks like it hurts—' he feels Harrington's hands running across his back, grabbing at one of his arms, lifting it so the brunet can see better and let out a *hiss*, before warm hands tentatively rub at his skin. 'Oh God— Oh God you're so *cold*. We've got to get you warmed up. We've got to— *I don't know what to do*— Calm down. Calm the *fuck down Harrington*. Deal with it. You have to— Ok. Yes. Come on, we've got to get you inside—'

Steve shifts underneath him, trying to get him off his lap, trying to stand, trying to move them both— 'Holy fucking *hell*, how are you so heavy?' the guy whines, plaintive. 'Come on Billy! You've got to help me out here—'

He feels exhausted and about to shake apart, but that voice, those warm hands— somehow he gets his limbs— just the usual number now— under himself and helps Steve get free and then pull them both upright.

They stagger inside, the brunet once more under his arm, taking part of his weight. Steve props him against the wall and very carefully locks the backdoor, before turning to him and saying, 'Oh. Oh it's *fading*. Thank God. It looked like—' long fingers come up to his face, tracing carefully over his cheek, his nose, down to his jaw, dark eyes peering at him intently— before the guy suddenly pulls back his hand. 'Sorry. Wow— yeah. *Sorry*. I'm being— Um. If you lean on me do you think you'll be able to make it upstairs?'

'D-d-d-don'-n-t-t kn-n-now-w-w,' he manages to chatter out as the shivering gets *stronger*. Fuck. He feels like someone's boiled his brain. Everything's kind of thick and syrupy and he can't *think*. He was dreaming— He thinks he was dreaming. He can't really remember.

'We'll have to *try*, we need to get you warm—' the brunet says, grabbing at him, taking his weight again, and leading him through

the house to the stairs.

‘W-w-warmmm,’ he manages, the heat of Steve against his side soaking into him, feeling *good*.

‘I know, I know, we’ll get you warm soon—’ the guys says, oblivious. ‘Fuck. I am *way too drunk* to be dealing with this right now.’

Somehow they make it up the stairs and across to Steve’s bathroom— though they almost end up slipping down the stairs a few times on the journey— where Steve tries to prop him against the wall to get the shower started.

He doesn’t want to let go. He’s so *cold*. Steve’s so *warm*. He lets himself list sideways so he ends up leaning full body against the brunet— ‘Ok, ok—’ he hears the guy say to himself, mind too full of fuzz to really process the words. ‘Ok, but this is *your* fault— I’ll just —’

His tired, shaky arms find themselves winding around that slender waist, his face slumping forward, aching brow resting against Steve’s shoulder. He hears a yelp. ‘*Really not my fault—*’

The body in his arms moves, not shaking him off, but reaching out and adjusting the water while remaining in his grasp. He rubs his face against a warm shoulder— fuck. There’s too much fucking *hair* in his face— He reaches for it, gently combing it out of the way, his freezing fingertips brushing the back of the other guy’s neck and making him shiver—

Huh. He blinks, fingers going to the strange, dark little shape inscribed into the skin behind the brunet’s ear, rubbing at it momentarily, mind too sluggish to comprehend what it says— but then Steve is shifting around in his arms, pushing him away a little, and mumbling about whether he should take his pants off.

‘They’re soaked through, I know they’re soaked through, it’s pretty fucking *obvious* they’re soaked through— and you’re still freezing, and— Ok. Ok. I can do this. This is nothing more than— I’m helping out a friend. That’s all. Just a friend— Oh my God Billy don’t be angry with me tomorrow—’ he feels fingers scrabble at his waistband

so he tries to help, struggling with the sodden cloth with hands that feel huge and clumsy and like they really should belong to someone else— ‘And that’s your dick. Of course it’s your dick, what did I expect—? Huh. You’re a *natural blond*— Oh fuck bad Steve don’t— Way, way too drunk for this. Oh my God I am *never drinking again*—’

Once they’ve got his sleep pants down his legs he kicks them into the corner, letting Steve guide him back into the shower, but finding his own hands don’t want to let go of the guy once he’s under the water. ‘What? No— *Billy*—’ the brunet struggles a little, but not too convincingly, as he pulls the guy into the shower with him and back into his arms, so he can stand there with Steve in his embrace, his face pressed against the soggy cloth of the guy’s t-shirt between his tense shoulder blades.

He hears a series of panicked, high-pitched noises, before all the tension in Steve’s body suddenly drains away. ‘*Fuck.*’ He hears whispered, full of defeat. ‘This is— You trying to torture me? You are going to *hate me* tomorrow when you remember this— but what can I do—? Jesus *Billy.*’

Eventually the heat of the water soaks all the way through his frozen flesh, making the shivering subside. His head still feels full of crap. His mind— his memory— all blurry and weird and *wrong*. He wants to stay here forever, hiding from the world, hiding from *reality* with his face pressed against something like comfort, but eventually enough of his brain comes online that he starts thinking Steve can’t be too comfortable standing in the shower in his t-shirt and— he pulls back enough to look and can’t really see anything— *briefs?*

‘You’re all wet,’ he mumbles.

A weird, kind of broken chuckle. ‘Oh, I am aware.’

‘We should—’ he reaches for the bottom of the t-shirt, pulling it up, revealing dark blue briefs soaked against Steve’s skin.

‘If you’re trying to fuck me this is *not* the way to go about it—’ the brunet’s voice comes fast and panicked. ‘Oh God I can’t believe I just *said that*. Don’t be angry, ok?’

‘M not angry,’ he mumbles, still tugging on the shirt. ‘Not tryna fuck you. Wouldn’t— wouldn’t treat you like *that*—’ He’d *never*, not without even *asking*— Fucking. *Disrespectful*. ‘—Just want. You look *uncomfortable*.’

A *bitter laugh* and then ‘I *wonder why*.’ Steve slaps at his hands until they let go, ‘Come on Billy, you’re warm now, let’s get you out of here so you can lie down or something— ok?’

He grunts an agreement. Fuck he is *tired*. Exhausted. Worn down all the way to the bones of him.

The brunet turns off the water, but he’s still wrapped around the guy and Steve seems too— *something*— to really— Yeah. They just stand there for a bit, but— He’s being an *asshole*, isn’t he? They need to get the brunet out of those wet clothes—

‘Come on,’ he manages, nudging at Steve until the guy climbs out of the shower. He follows, still wrapped around that tall, slender form. Fucking— *all legs and hair*. Long hair too— soaked flat like it was at the community pool and brushing his shoulders. *Nice hair. Sexy* like this. Bet whichever faggot’s managed to get their hands on him likes touching it when they—

His arms clench tighter around the guy’s waist, making Steve squeak. ‘Ok, no. Billy— *Billy* you’ve got to let me go, ok? This is getting— This is getting *weird*, man. Weird and you don’t— I know you don’t— Fucking *mixed messages*, I swear to God.’

‘Don’t wanna,’ he manages. ‘You feel nice.’

‘Oh God help me—’ he feels the brunet shudder in his grip. ‘Billy. I *mean it*. Come on— We’ll just— Look. My bedroom’s just through there, you can lie down, just—’ Another shudder, and then Steve seems to give up on trying to get him to let go in favour of walking them both to the room in question.

It’s—

Wow. Ok.

Ugly, but—

There's the bed and the bed is tempting enough that when Steve leads him to it and tries to push him onto its soft surface he lets himself go, missing the other guy's warm body the moment he lets it go. 'Oh God Billy Hargrove is naked in my bed— I'll just— Oh *fuck my life*. I'm gonna go and drink another bottle of wine while sitting on the kitchen floor, ok? Just— I dunno, *shout* if you need something.'

'Stay,' he says, hand reaching, reaching, curling around the brunet's wrist as the guy tries to leave.

'Billy,' Steve whines, plaintive.

He's already feeling cold again. Cold and alone and *afraid*— 'Just— Stay. I don't want to dream anymore—'

A pause and then, 'This was your idea, ok? Don't go getting mad at me tomorrow— *oh who am I kidding?* I need to change into something other than this wet shit, so let me go for a minute—'

'Just take it off,' he suggests.

Another pause, then a slightly insane sounding laugh. 'I am not getting into bed with you *naked*, man. I mean, it's *bad enough that you're naked*—'

Steve pulls his arm away, and he whines as the other guy's warmth leaves. Fuck. He feels fucking *awful*. Exhausted and loopy and like nothing's really *real*— he wants that warm body back in his arms. He wants to be able to tell himself it'll all be ok—

A moment later Steve reappears, lurking awkwardly by the side of the bed in a full set of winter pyjamas. 'You getting in?' he manages with the arch of a brow.

The brunet lets out a heavy breath. 'If you're going to kill me tomorrow can you at least do it before I wake up?'

He laughs, because— 'I'd never hurt you. Not *again*.'

'I have no idea if *you've* gone insane or *I've* gone insane or if this is some really, really, really *weird* dream—' very, very *carefully* Steve

climbs onto the bed about as far away from him as possible. Well that's not what he wants—

He reaches out, grabs the brunet, and pulls him close, chuckling again at the way the guy squawks as he's dragged down half on top of him, one fabric covered thigh between his own, pressing down comfortingly over his soft dick. He wraps his arms around the guy's slender torso, nuzzling his face against the side of Steve's face, waiting, waiting—

Eventually— with an *exhausted* sigh— the brunet relaxes, letting his weight down so it's half on the bed and half across *him*. 'I'm just going to sleep now and pretend this isn't happening—' he hears barely more than whispered into the air by his ear.

'Ok,' he replies, letting his own eyes close, letting himself relax back on the bed. It's funny, Steve feels so *good* in his arms—

16. Chapter 16

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for homophobic language, a bit of sexism I guess re: women's cigarettes, body horror, a bit of suicidal ideation, also I feel like I should probably mention something about how not good for you it is to smoke in general- let alone as much as Billy does- but we all probably knew that already.

Anyway... Denial Powers Activate! I hope you all enjoy the chapter, and thanks for reading, leaving kudos and commenting!

On a (slightly) more serious note it's probably going to be round about the new year before I can get the next chapter out, and there may be a two or three weeks at the start of January without an update after that- not quite sure just yet, I'll hopefully be able to tell you more next update- but then things should become more regular again.

When he wakes up Steve Harrington is on top of him and his own hard dick is pressed up against the guy's clothed thigh. It takes him a moment to realise this, because at first he's just aware that he's comfortable, that he feels *safe*, that he thinks he actually *slept* for a while— Then he realises someone's in bed with him. *Then* he realises whoever they are they feel real fucking *tense*. **And then** he opens his eyes and to meet Steve's own ones. Big. Brown. Kind of panicked looking—

'What's wrong?' he asks, voice husky from sleep.

Steve blurts out a shrill little giggle— which makes him shake and feels fucking *good* on his dick— and pulls back a little, which is when he also realises he's got both his arms wrapped around the brunet so the guy can't really go anywhere— Hm. How did he get here?

'This was not *my* idea,' the brunet rushes to tell him. 'Um— can you

let me go now?’

He was— was he dreaming? He can’t really remember the details. It was— was it the *Upside Down* again? He can remember the rot everywhere— and then he can remember getting *angry*— and then— ‘Did I actually sleepwalk into your pool last night?’

The brunet flinches. ‘That— That is something I think we’re going to have to talk about, even though I wasn’t— Like, I *want* to let you decide when— and *if*— you want to talk about it, but—’

His brain is not working anywhere near well enough to parse that. ‘What the fuck are you talking about?’

A pause, then Steve blows out long breath. ‘Ok. I think we should both get up. I think— I’ll lend you some clothes. I’ll make us some breakfast— and some *coffee*, holy fuck do I need coffee right now— and then I think we’re going to have to talk about last night. Or, you know, the *you ending up in the pool and some other stuff about that* part of last night—’ a slightly crooked little smile, ‘— that is— *if you don’t feel like killing me for this—?*’

He frowns. ‘For what?’

The brunet groans in frustration. ‘*I give up—* fuck self-preservation. *Jesus* Billy. I’m lying on your *dick*, or have you not noticed?’

Oh. Yeah— That’s right, he’s *naked*— He remembers— Shower. Not wanting to let Steve go— He shifts his hips back, trying to get the intrusive presence of his dick away from poor Steve. *Not cool Hargrove*, talk about not even *asking* first. ‘Sorry,’ he says.

‘Aren’t you mad at *me* about it?’ the brunet squawks.

‘Why? It’s *my* dick, you didn’t ask to be lying on it, and I’m the one who was all—’ he’s not quite sure how to encompass the idea of being all clingy, without actually admitting he was being *all clingy*.

A pause, brown eyes looking at him with *consideration*, and then a nod, ‘Ok. Ok then— Um. If you let me go I’ll get off it—?’

‘Oh, yeah, *sure—*’ he unwraps his arms, freeing the brunet.

Steve very, very carefully pulls his leg away, rolling off him to sit on the edge of the bed with his back to him for a moment— he hears the guy sigh— and then the brunet's standing up and heading for the dresser and a moment later throwing a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt at him with a shrug and, 'They should fit. Like, we're almost the same height and— Well, yeah, you're a bit more *built* but— I'm just gonna go get dressed in the bathroom. Ok?' With that the guy scurries out of the room, bundle of clothes in hand.

He sits up, running a hand over his face. Wow, ok, yeah— Steve's bedroom is as ugly this morning as he thinks he thought it was last night. All that— Is that *plaid* wallpaper? It's kind of depressing— Also, oddly, not very Steve.

He gets out of bed, idly observing the way his dick bobs in the air as he does— Well. It's not like he can jack off *now*. *Here*. Jesus. Stupid fucking thing—

It was pressed up against Steve's thigh all night—

Yep. Not following that thought anywhere. If the guy's not mad at him about it there's no point dwelling on it. Steve's gotta know he wasn't gonna try anything— The fact that he's *not a fag* aside, he'd *never*— Like. He prides himself on treating the girls he's with *right*. Even if he doesn't like them. Even the ones he can't help kind of feeling *contempt* for— He's never given *anyone* reason to complain in that department.

If he did suddenly wake up a fag he wouldn't just— He'd *ask* first. Ask *nicely*. You know?

*He could have just thrust his hips upwards and **rubbed** against the guy until he—*

Nope. Nope. Not thinking about it—

An echoing voice, some incoherent remnant of his dreams —*squeak just like her—*

A strange surge of *rage* swells in him, before he bites it back down. He wonders if that's what the brunet expected, just being *used—* if

that's the way he's been treated before. No fucking *sense*, people in this shithole town.

He glares at his dick kinda helplessly. Fucking thing isn't softening up — It would be. Oh it would be so easy to just— He rubs the palm of his hand across the head, shuddering at the way the sensation *surges* in him— *No*. He pulls his hand back, grabbing the clothes and getting dressed as quick as he can. He kinda needs a piss—

Steve's out of the bathroom when he goes to use the facilities— fuck he's always hated trying to piss with a hardon— and once he's done and washed his hands and headed downstairs he finds the brunet kneeling on the kitchen floor, scrubbing at a puddle of— dried *red wine*?

There's a bottle. Looks *cheap*. Looks *empty*— There's also a sheet that matches the set on the brunet's bed in a sad little pile in the corner between two counters. 'The fuck happened here?' he asks.

Steve jumps a little, then looks up at him with a rueful smile. 'Um— You startled me when you came barrelling around the house last night.'

'Startled you doing *what*?' he eyes the wine bottle, the sheet, the absence of a glass.

A shrug. 'Couldn't sleep, you must know how it is, man?'

'Yeah—' that he does. 'You need a hand with that?'

The brunet shakes his head. 'Why don't you go out for a smoke— Um. I know you don't have yours on you, but I found a pack of my mom's—' great, *women's cigarettes*— '—though they are Gauloises. Um. *Unfiltered* ones, so you may not want—'

Huh. *Gauloises*? 'That's fine,' he's smoked them before— usually when he's bummed one off someone with artistic pretensions. Not his favourite, but— He scoops the blue packet and the matchbook Steve left out for him off the counter and heads out the back to smoke by the pool.

He lights up and plops himself down in one of the lounges, looking

out over the water. Fucking *embarrassing*, isn't it? Sleepwalking into poor Steve's pool.

Fuck. *Pool*— Oh *fuck it*. He'll worry about it later— if he's real nice he can probably sweettalk them into letting him get away with skipping— and if *not*. There's other jobs in this shithole town. He can always do yardwork or something— fucking *Neil's* fucking hopeless, so it's usually up to him to maintain shit around the house. Bored, unhappy housewives are also usually pretty fucking *happy* to hire him for whatever as long as they can *look* at him.

After a while he hears the door open, looks over to see the brunet approaching with two mugs of coffee. 'Here,' the guy says, handing one over, before taking a seat on the neighbouring lounge.

They both sip in silence for a moment, before the brunet makes a kind of helpless, bleating noise and says, 'Look, I'm just going to say it— When you, *you know*— Um— first showed up in my yard last night—' the brunet trails off, frowning, *looking* at him, eyes roaming over his face, his bare arms— 'You weren't *you* Billy. You were— I don't know how much you remember of what happened at the mall, but you turned into—' again he trails off.

His head starts feeling kind of fuzzy, heartbeat echoing in his ears— 'A *monster*. Are you saying I was—'

'I don't know if *monster's* the right word,' the brunet says, looking uncomfortable. 'It seems— Because you're *not* a monster. Like, *you're really not*— but I don't know what else to call it—'

'Well *whatever it is* are you saying I was *that* when I landed in your pool?'

Steve looks away. 'Yeah— but you were *you* again when you came to the surface, only—' brown eyes glance at him, then frown, worried.

'What?' he demands.

The brunet glances at the pack of cigarettes. 'Can I have one?'

'They're *your* cigarettes,' he points out, but gets one out and hands it to the guy, lighting it for him— a smile creeping across his face at the

way the brunet winces at the first lungful of smoke, taking the cylinder from between his lips to give the French cigarette a dirty look, before sighing out the smoke.

‘When you came out of the water you were covered in all these— is *wounds* the right word? Like. Red, swollen *lines* all swirled over you— fuck, they looked like they *hurt* too— but then they started to fade, and now it’s—’ brown eyes examine his face again, ‘— I think I can still see them, but they’re faint—’

He reaches up reflexively, rubs a hand across the one over his nose. ‘Yeah— they’ve been there since I woke up, you know, *after*—’

‘I thought you looked a bit—’ Steve bites the bottom one of those coral lips. ‘I just didn’t want to say anything.’

He shrugs, ‘Yeah, well there’s the *bullet scars* too, and I’m also about forty pounds heavier, so—’

And then he starts laughing. He doesn’t mean to, it’s just— ‘*Outside matches the inside*, huh? Fucking— *monster*. I was *doing better too*—’ and then the laughter shifts. He doesn’t start crying or anything, but instead this sound escapes— deep, almost *shrill*. It’s so fucking— He doesn’t even know. The feeling is so *complicated*. Frustrated and angry and scared and disappointed and so much like he wants to *hit something*— or maybe himself. Maybe get his car back and go driving down by the quarry as fast as he can until he loses control of the wheel and—

He’s not sure exactly what happens next, but Steve’s suddenly standing next to him, and his face is pressed against the blood-warm cloth of the guy’s t-shirt over his belly, and long fingers are stroking his hair, and— ‘I hope this is ok—’ and then the brunet starts making this *noise*. This humming—

His arms go up to hold the guy in place, face nuzzling in, whole body *shaking*. He can barely hear over the panicked sound of his own breath, but he can hear enough to know the humming is continuing. Smooth. *Soothing*—

He starts to feel— light. Head kind of *fizzing*. Sort of stupid, but a

different kind of stupid. Stupid like being *high*— which isn't a sensation he always likes. Sometimes it softens him up too much. Takes too much of his *control*— but now. He likes this. He rubs his face back and forth against the warmth of Steve's body. This is good. This is—

Eventually Steve pulls back—somehow he manages not to *whine* at the loss— and says, 'You're *not* a monster,' and then, 'How about crepes, for, um, breakfast?'

'Ok,' he replies, brain coming back online. 'These the crepes Robin was going on about?'

The brunet nods. 'And I've got real maple syrup now, so they'll be even better— I suppose you'll need to go home then. You should probably get changed if we're going to go pick up Max— *are* you getting Max today?'

He shrugs. 'Wasn't clear, I think she was just going to ring me when she got sick of them—'

There's a pause, the brunet chewing on his bottom lip. 'Do you think we should tell anyone about—? Because— I mean. I want to say Hopper will help— and I know Mrs Byers would if she could— but I really don't think there's anyone who can do anything about, *you know*, and— Maybe I'm being— hah— *stupid*— but I can see too many ways this could all end with you locked up in a lab somewhere.'

The thought makes him shudder. No. *Never*.

Steve's right. He already knew pretty much everything the guy said, and anyway— 'I don't want to bring anyone else into this. I don't want to tell anyone. Fuck. I don't want to *talk about it*, ok? Just. Let's — let's forget about it. If it happens again— We'll work something out then, but this is the first time it's happened since— So—'

'It might not happen again?' the brunet suggests, not looking even remotely convinced, but it seems it's what they're both hoping for, because when he nods Steve nods too.

They head back inside then, the brunet stopping to scoop up his horrible bat from where it's lying under one of the other lounges, glancing at him with something like guilt. 'I didn't know it was you at first, last night—'

So he'd been ready to defend himself— He nods. 'Smart move—' he just wishes he could reassure himself with the idea that the bat would even *hurt* something like— *that* him— if it came down to it. Fuck. If something else gets loose from the Upside Down—

He'll get Max, El, and Steve— maybe the little Byers kid— oh, and *Erica*— together somewhere he can keep them safe— He's gotta believe he can keep them safe.

17. Chapter 17

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for homophobic language, references to child abuse, and the usual Billy-language stuff. I don't think I've missed any, but like always please tell me if I have.

OK, as things stand right now this might be the last chapter until the end of January, but more chapters **are** coming, I promise. I hope you've all been having a great festive season/end of the year/etc. without too much stress. Um. I feel kind of something- for leaving the story here before the bit of a break, but... Anyway. When next we resume we shall be resuming from Steve's POV, so there's that to look forward to. Thank you all so much for reading, for commenting and for the kudos, and for letting me know you're enjoying my writing! Have a Happy New Year everyone!

Like yesterday it's kind of interesting watching Steve cook— though the brunet doesn't seem to be enjoying the solo attention that much — not that he seems pissed off or anything, more a bit nervous, shoulders getting tenser the longer he— Ok. Yeah. Maybe *staring* at the guy is kind of a dick move, but it's *interesting*. Steve seems to know what he's doing more that *Susan* does, at least, and the end result is—

Fuck the crepes are fucking—

Perfection.

'How the fuck did you learn to cook like this?' he demands in between big, sticky, *sweet* bites.

The brunet shrugs, looking down, a bit *awkward*— words skipping

over themselves, almost tripping each other up. He's fucking *shy* about it— how fucking *adorable*. 'I just *can*. Like— If I see someone cook something usually I can remember everything they did— all the ingredients and how much and what they did with them— and if not the first time, then after the *second*— *techniques* too— and what goes with what, so if I actually *try* I can usually make things up myself— and it's just— it's *easy*. I don't know why— It's weird really. I mean. I'm not— Well. For whatever reason it's something I'm actually *good at*. Something not *athletic*, anyway.'

'You seem pretty good with the kids, even though they're—' he sighs, just thinking about them.

'Little shits?' Steve asks, then laughs. 'Yeah. *Weird* isn't it? It's not how I ever pictured myself— though you are pretty good with Max, and El, and at least the boys *listen* to you— Fuck. I'd ask you to teach me how to be scary, but—'

He laughs at the idea. 'You're too—'

'What?' Steve asks, smiling all friendly at him. 'Too much of a *loser*?'

And the guy's all soft and sweet and it's almost a joke, but part of him doesn't like it, wants to— and the words just slip out. 'No. You're — Steve Harrington you are too good a person to scare children.'

The forkful of crepe the brunet had been lifting to his mouth is slowly placed back down, brown eyes *staring* at him. Then Steve goes bright red— not even pink—but *red* and makes a strangled groaning sound.

'What?' he asks, but Steve doesn't answer, just— Is the guy *actually* malfunctioning? 'Jesus, *what*?'

'It's *stupid*—' the brunet manages eventually. 'Oh my God is it stupid. Sorry, I'm being— Wow. *Lame*.'

'Come on, now I'm *curious*.'

An uncomfortable little shrug. 'I don't know man, it's—' Steve blows out a breath. 'As I said, I'm being *lame*. I'm sure you didn't really *mean* it to be a big thing, or anything, I just don't know how often someone's called me a "good person"— so, yeah. *Lame*.'

It makes him feel weirdly— *embarrassed*— but not in a bad way, so he repeats it, trying to convince the guy of what's so fucking *obvious*.

‘But— *no*. I’m really *not*—’ Steve insists. ‘Seriously, you should talk to Robin— or, like, *anyone* I went to school with before— Well, pretty much before *you* came to town, though that wasn’t what— *changed* things— Maybe not *Tommy*—’ the brunet’s face twists, something bitter coming over it. ‘I can’t *imagine* what he’d tell you. Or Carol— but, like *anyone else*.’

‘Yeah, but people are *idiots*,’ he points out. ‘How many of those people you’re telling me to ask actually *knew you*?’

Steve frowns. ‘What do you mean? It’s not like I’m all that *deep*, what you see is pretty much what you get.’

He almost laughs. In the time he’s known Steve he’s seen all sorts of different Steves— from that cold, aloof, seemingly judgemental guy he used to harass, to Steve with a baseball bat scared but ready to face off against *monsters*, to Steve with the kids— kind of exasperated but always trying to *help*— to the Steve he’s sometimes seen when it’s just the two of them. So unbearably— Ok. Yeah, *faggy* but— *Sweet*. Then he realises, ‘Wait. You really think that, don’t you?’

‘What?’ the brunet’s face scrunches up like he thinks he’s being criticised.

‘Most of the people in this town they’re—’ his face scrunches up even thinking about them, all smiles and small-town stupidity— ‘They’re shallow as *fuck*— but you—?’ he shakes his head, ‘You’re not like that. *Not at all*.’

Steve blinks at him for a moment, not getting any less *red*, before nodding. ‘I gotta say there’s a lot more to *you* too than I ever expected—’ the brunet says, sounding a little— *off*.

After that Steve’s a bit weird. Not— Not *angry* with him, or mean, or *frightened*, or even back to that cold, unimpressed guy of when they first met— Just— Quiet. Quiet and a little brittle, almost. Fucking *weird*.

Makes this unpleasant feeling start building up in his chest. Not quite *guilt*, but— Like he's afraid he's done something wrong but doesn't know what. His first instinct is to get *mean*, put Steve down before the other guy can make him feel like shit about himself, but— It's *Steve*. That would be— Fuck. He doesn't want to make the guy look like— Not *again* anyway. He's had a gutful of the consequences of hurting Steve Harrington already.

After breakfast the brunet drives him back home— Quiet. Quiet the whole ride— He stares out the passenger window and smokes one of the Gauloises— now *his* if he wants the pack, and who's he to turn down free cigarettes?

'You want to come in for a coffee?' he asks when they get there.

Steve hesitates— 'Um. Ok?'

Ah— *Keys*. Hm— Fucking *Neil* won't let them leave out a spare, or leave the house unlocked, so—

Wait— did he get out the night before?

He leads the brunet around the side of the house to his bedroom— window wide fucking open. He climbs in, waits for Steve to follow— but the guy is giving him a *look*.

'It's not like I was thinking what I was doing last night,' he points out.

The guy concedes the point, following him in through his bedroom window. The brunet tries not to be too obvious about checking out the space, eyes seeming to linger on a couple of his posters, before looking over at him. 'Coffee?'

He gets a pot started, checking the answering machine while they wait. The first one is from Adam at the pool.

'Hi man, this is Adam. *Adam* who works with you at the pool in case I've become irrelevant to you since we last spoke—' a bit of a chuckle there, no sign the guy's mad at him or anything. *Weird*. 'Pool's closed today so you don't have to come in— Joey Mackinson— you've probably got no idea who that is, but he's like *twelve* and a total turd

— hah!— had some massive diarrhoea death shit in it yesterday after you left— No idea what they're feeding that kid but someone should probably do something about it because *oh my God* it was *rank*— and it was supposed to be all cleaned out by today but now half the equipment's like *fucked*— seriously, *what are they feeding that kid?*— and it's all way above any of our pay grade so they're getting someone in to fix it— which I wish I knew before I showed up. Um, yeah— supposedly someone will keep us informed. Yeah—'

Fucking *yuck*. Glad he missed that. At least he doesn't have to worry about his job now.

And then a message from Mr Duvall telling him he can come and pick up his car any time after lunch— The satisfaction he expects at that doesn't come. A glance at the brunet— frowning to himself and looking out the window— *Of course he'll still see Steve around*. As long as the kids—

Still. Not like he can ask the brunet to hang around at his house until after lunch and then drive him to pick up his car— If Max had called then— *Actually*.

'Hey!' brown eyes meet his, 'How about we forget the shit coffee here and go get Max and El and take them out for waffles? I've been meaning to treat El after all the shit she's been through. Coffee's better at the diner anyway—'

A small smile flickers over that handsome face. 'Sounds good.'

He has to get changed first— but of course he can't spend as much time fixing his hair— or even shaving his *face*— as he'd like, so he looks a bit like a bum— *Why is he always looking like a bum in front of Steve?* But a splash of Aramis means he at least *smells* good.

Mind you Steve himself is wandering around with his flowing locks brushing his shoulders instead of coiffured up into their usual mane — Though the guy still looks *great*. He'd almost say better than usual. How the fuck is that *possible*?

At the Byers house no one's there but Max, El and the little Byers kid — Mrs. Byers and the Chief are apparently at work and larger Byers

off with Wheeler somewhere— Fuck. It's not like they can invite the girls but leave the little fag behind—

Which is how he ends up at the diner with Steve, Max, El and the least shitty child that isn't *Erica*. Little Byers seems nervous and keeps making noise about not having much money when Max tries to get him to order whatever frothy concoction of cream and syrup she thinks he needs—

'Kid, look. *I'm* the one paying, get what you like.' It's just like with Max the first time around— fucking weirdly *responsible* kids. Yeah, sure, when he was fourteen he never expected anyone to do *shit* for him— no free rides and all— but Max and little Byers are not *him*. They deserve better than the shit that comes from having *Neil* as a dad.

'I can—' Steve begins.

'Nope. No way Steve, I am treating *you all*. Give way under my largesse.'

By the time the kids are done they're all whining and nauseous— 'I told you, didn't I Maxine? You did *not* need that second milkshake—'

'You bought it for me so it's *your* fault,' is her moaned argument against that idea. 'Oh God I'm gonna be *sick*.'

Since she's apparently not bored of El and little Byers yet— which, ok, he can get that— he agrees to let Steve drop them back at the horrible Byers house before he and the brunet go to get his car.

She wants him to then go get her bike and bring it over to the Byers' so she can go home whenever she wants— but, *like fuck*. 'Nope. No way Maxine, you are *ringing me* and I am *coming to get you*. Especially if it's late. You are *not* biking around this creepy shithole in the dark. You get eaten by a monster I am not going to be fucking *pleased*.'

She bitches a bit about that but eventually gives up.

When they get back to the awful Byers place bigger Byers and Wheeler— *Wheeler* Wheeler, not *shitty kid* Wheeler, emerge from the house with faces both pinched in fuck-ugly little frowns. They *look* at

him. Look at him like he's something fucking *gross* the cat's dragged in and then want to talk to Steve or something.

He remembers that he wanted to talk to them— well, rip them both a new one for not taking care of El while he was trapped in the Russian base— but now does not seem to be the time. Anyway, might upset little Byers— kid almost always looks on the verge of tears anyway— and he does not want that on his conscience.

'You don't have to talk to them if you don't want to,' he tells the brunet as he leans back on the beemer, shaking out one of the Gauloises and lighting up with his zippo.

Steve gives him a funny look, then a small, strange little smile— but then goes off to talk to the two losers. He can't hear what they're saying, but they've pulled the brunet in close, the two of them leaning into his personal space and talking to him intently—

He thinks Steve looks uncomfortable, one hand going to his sexy hair again and again, brushing it out of his face—

—

He starts getting *real pissed off*. It's fucking *obvious* Steve wants nothing to do with them, that they're getting in his space, *upsetting* him. What the fuck do they think they're doing, huh? What gives them the right to—? And in *what universe* is Wheeler allowed to put her hand on his arm like that, to duck her head down to catch his gaze because he's avoiding her eyes, to just—

Touch him.

They can't *touch him*. He's *not theirs to touch*—

And then Tommy fucking H.'s voice starts echoing in his ears.

—on his knees for psycho Byers— and —*she probably got sick of sharing*
—

He wants to go over there, to wrap his arms around Steve— or maybe put himself between the brunet and those two— make it *clear* they're not welcome. That Steve's not interested. That they're not allowed to

even *look at*, let alone *touch* what isn't—

Theirs.

—

—

Oh—

—

Fuck.

—

He almost drops the cigarette.

No.

No no no no no nononononononononono *NO*.

—

FUCK.

—

—

—

Fuck.

—

When Steve's done with them the brunet comes back over to the car — annoyed, he can tell. Pissed off and upset about whatever that was about.

And all he can think is *fuck, he's fucking gorgeous*.

And just *fuck*.

And *no no no no*—

Oh fucking *no*.

18. Chapter 18

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: Dysfunctional family relationships, hints a verbal/psychological child abuse, sexist and homophobic language, mentions of that creep at the pool, possibly more. Do let me know.

Wow. So I managed to get this bit done. Yay me! So here we are from Steve's perspective, and learning that Steve is also good at (an admittedly different kind of) denial. It's been a shitty couple of months here in Australia, with the fires, with the political incompetence, and I hope everyone- all readers from everywhere- are well and safe right now. Thank you all, so very much, for reading my story, for the comments and the kudos! Take care of yourselves!

Billy Hargrove is the single most confusing person in existence. *Oh God. So confusing.*

First the apology— right on the heels of basically being accused of being a *pussy* if he needs one, and then— just— *all of it.*

Billy is not gay. Billy is not bisexual. Billy is not *remotely* interested in guys— and above all Billy is not *flirting*. He has to keep telling himself that. Billy is not *flirting with him*. Billy would *never* flirt with a guy— Billy needs to learn how to interact with him in a way that's less like flirting if that's the case because the guy is sending— just— the most *mixed* messages. Sometimes not even *mixed*, sometimes just —

But Billy isn't interested in guys. He is *not*. He worked that out the first time, when the guy beat his face in, even though before that—

Billy must just be a very flirty guy—

Ok. Not with *everyone*. Not even with *most people*. So far just with hot

girls and *him*— with most guys Billy is— wow. The guy is *amazingly* hostile— Like poor Mr. Duvall. Like *Hopper*— but—

God.

It's making him—

And he knows he has to be careful, that one *whiff* of the fact he's bisexual and Billy will— Billy will—

Hurt him.

But—

Every now and then he forgets and gets carried away and it's so *nice* — Billy is so *nice* to him. All— *protective* and stuff— and oh how he hates the fact that *that* does it for him— but—

And the guy didn't even get totally homicidal even though he was basically on the blond's dick all night— which makes it sound way different that it actually was— because it's not like he was *on his dick* — so much as Billy was all freaked out after—

And who wouldn't be freaked out? *He* was freaked out and he didn't even turn into a monster— and obviously there is a level of freaked out that means even *Billy Hargrove* will start seeking physical comfort from whoever's around— and that person just happened to be *him*— and—

In the shower. Billy *naked*. Billy's *dick*—

It's such a *nice dick* too— Like, not *too big* and well proportioned and a nice fleshy *pink* when it's hard.

And it was *hard*. Underneath his thigh. For *hours*.

—

And the way Billy had seemed to want to get his clothes off. Like *Tommy* or Carol when—

But, as the guy had said, just because he was— *whatever that was*—

doesn't mean Billy was trying to *fuck him*. Vain of him. *So vain*.

He still feels kind of humiliated for bringing it up, for being put back in his place— but at least the blond was *nice about it*. Didn't *hit him* or anything.

Just

— not trying to fuck him.

Because Billy would never want to fuck him.

Because Billy is *straight*.

Because *he needs to remember that*.

Actually, what he *needs* is to talk to Robin. Oh God does he need to talk to Robin— He's, like, done his *best* to avoid answering any of her questions about what kind of guys he finds hot— because basically any answer he gives is just going to lead back to *Billy Hargrove*, *Billy Hargrove is **exactly** the kind of guy he finds hot*— and he's pretty sure she's going to be—

Disappointed in him.

Sad to say he still hasn't found a way to make the two of them— even *get on*, let alone like each other. He gets it though. Billy is very — *masculine*. Masculine in a way that's not very—

It's—

Hm.

—

He would say it's not very *enlightened*, or like sensitive or whatever, but the way Billy is with Max. With *El*—

But still he's—

Billy's just very *masculine*, whatever that means, and Robin's—

Pretty much sick of guys' bullshit, he'd say. Like *Nancy*—

And oh *God* that was awkward. Her and Jonathan pulling him aside and interrogating him about what he was doing with *Billy Hargrove* of all people, and why the kids were with them, and then pretty much telling him off for letting either El or Will go anywhere with the guy — and he doesn't think what El does is any of their business— more *Hopper's*, and Hopper hasn't said anything about her not being allowed near Billy as far as he knows—

When he'd tried to explain that Billy isn't like what they think he's like they'd pointed out the whole, you know, *concussion* thing— Which, *yeah*, but that was *then*. Either Billy's changed or the guy doesn't hate him so much anymore, and even so— well, *yeah*, the guy did kind of attack Lucas that night too— but *since then* Billy hasn't— well. *Tommy*, but— *Anyway*, Tommy is not El or Will. Billy *likes* El— seems to like *Will* too— or at least hates him less than the other boys, but, you know, pointing out that Will isn't *Mike* and so is probably isn't going to piss Billy off anytime soon isn't exactly the kind of argument you can make to *Mike's sister*.

It'd all left him feeling small and *stupid*. Like Nancy really doesn't trust his judgement— and the way she'd *looked at him*. Ok, yeah, he is kind of a mess and, yeah, he hasn't done his hair— but none of that was Billy's fault—

Except it kind of was, but not for any reason he was going to explain to her. He cannot imagine their reaction to the whole *Monster Billy sleepwalking into his pool* thing. Or Billy trying to get him naked. Or Billy's dick—

Anyway, even if all *that* hadn't happened he'd probably still be looking pretty crappy today. He had been sitting on the kitchen floor drinking and kind of crying to himself when the horrible clatter of Monster Billy's many bony feet skittering up the driveway had made him freak the fuck right out.

He's almost kind of pissed at Dustin for the Zener cards— not that he should be, it's just— *bad memories*. Probably why he had that nightmare that led to him just *giving up* on sleep and deciding the drink himself into incoherence in the kitchen instead.

Though— maybe if he hadn't gone and found the proper deck—

Between the association with Uncle Martin and finding all the cards Tommy defaced— which he'd forgotten about. Stupid of him. He would have had to remove them before he gave the pack to the kids — He doesn't like the idea of El— or even *Dustin*— being stuck saying, "Cock and Balls!" and "Big hairy pussy!" and "Tits!" and "Tommy's cock is the biggest cock in Hawkins!" and "Lick my asshole!" and "I'm a faggot in a miniskirt!" the way Tommy used to find it so funny to make *him*.

Seeing the guy's writing— and his ugly little drawings— had made him feel— *sad*. Really. *Hurt*.

At least he didn't dream of the guy calling him a faggot or something, or— yeah.

No. Instead of having a sensible nightmare— You know, dreaming of the Upside Down and *monsters*— he ended up dreaming about back when Uncle Martin was trying to fix him. It was the cards— stupid fucking cards.

It's not like it was that bad, the dream. He was here, at home, not at some dream version of the "lab" that Uncle Martin always wanted to take him to— the idea scared the crap out of him, even as a little kid — Hah. Funny. He has his *dad* to thank for never being taken there, the man didn't want other people to see, to *know* his son was a retard and even a mind like Uncle Martin was having trouble fixing him.

So, yeah, *here*. In the room that Uncle Martin used to use before the man and his dad had that big fight and Uncle Martin was banned from the house—

It's a guestroom now.

He still hates going in there.

In the dream he had that thing on his head again and Uncle Martin was trying to make him do whatever it was with the cards but it wasn't happening— like always once the guy started getting mad at him— and the man was getting *angrier and angrier* and he could *feel it* in the air around them, suffocating him—

Then that was happening but he could also hear his Uncle talking to his mom, the way you can sometimes in dreams, when more than one thing is happening at once— and then her telling him to just *try harder Stevie, you can do this if you just **put the effort in***— except also, at the same time, his uncle telling her that it's hopeless, *he's hopeless, there's nothing there Diane, whatever potential— if there is anything there it barely **registers**— he is weaker than **either** of us, and compared to **Jane**— I'm afraid to say, but I think you have **wasted** yourself in your choice of husband—* and fragments of his mother's voice— *you've seen Joe with women, what he can— then **Don't** remind me. He is— **a man like that— Divorce him. Try again— you're still young enough to— and I will **not** end up like our mother, you have **no idea** what it was like living with her—***

And he'd just felt so *bad*. So very bad. All the disappointment and *anger* and all of it pressing him down until he felt like he was going to— *disappear*.

Yeah.

So, it's not like *Billy's* appearance in his backyard is entirely to blame for him looking like shit.

He hates that he's kind of mad at Nancy now. He doesn't want to be mad at Nancy. Nancy is— she is so *amazing*— but—

When he'd escaped her and Jonathan and gone back to the car Billy had been weird. *Weirder* than even normal Billy weirdness, and it makes him think the guy must have heard at least *part* of what they were saying and maybe they actually managed to *hurt Billy Hargrove's feelings*— So he now feels kind of bad and hopes Billy is ok, but can't find out, because the guy hadn't extended any more invitations to coffee or food or anything and just wanted to be dropped off at the garage to get his car. Hell, Billy didn't even want him to stick around, even though—

He hopes it's ok. It should be ok. Mr Duvall and Billy seemed to be getting on ok by the end of last time, didn't they?

Fuck. That part of dealing with Billy is really *stressful*. The way you never know if he's just going to go *off* on, like, *every* guy you

encounter— Not that he blames the guy for telling off that old pervert who was looking at the girls— and Billy wasn't imagining it either, he saw the guy too— but instead of thinking of going and starting a scene and getting in the man's face he'd been thinking maybe they should go, or encourage the girls to swim or go to some part of the pool where the man couldn't see them— He feels kind of cowardly actually, in comparison—

But he could still see how freaked out El was at Billy's behaviour— even if Max did seem *used to it*.

Of course the whole thing's that *man's* fault. If people weren't gross then— but people *are* gross, and if people are going to be gross then it's probably better to have someone like Billy getting in their face about it than everyone just pretending it's not happening and letting them get away with it. Right?

Anyway. Mr Duvall is not like that. The guy is actually *really nice*. Like when his grandpa sent him his car and his dad got all upset because— well, *one* his grandpa sent it to him and his dad doesn't talk to his grandpa anymore, and *two* it was *BMW* and his dad refuses to drive anything that isn't a *Mercedes*.

His dad had insisted the car go to Mr Duvall's garage to be checked out, where he'd then started going on about how it was a lemon and everything that was wrong with it— even though his dad knows *nothing* about cars— and that they'd have to sell it and *he'd* started getting upset— embarrassing to admit— because his grandpa had given it to him and it was the first he'd heard from him since he'd decided to stop annoying the old man all the time— and then Mr Duvall had butted in and told his dad there was *nothing wrong with the car*, that *she's a beauty*, and to *stop tormenting the poor kid*.

God his dad had *gone off*— and not even *Billy* goes off like his dad does— but Mr Duvall hadn't backed down— not through all the *don't you know who I am?'s* and the *I'll ruin yous* and the *no one in this shithole town will ever use your garage again!*s. Shows how powerful his dad *actually is*, doesn't it? Mr Duvall is still in business because Mr Duvall is liked and respected and Hawkins *bedrock*— and even his dad's Benzes get serviced there— not that his dad will go anywhere near the garage in *person*, no, it's up to *him* to drop them off.

So it should be fine— and it's not like Billy *needs* him to—

It's not even like with his dad— though he learnt to smooth things over with other people in the first place dealing with the man, when he was— *too aggressively himself*— but, unless he really loses his temper, his dad tries to play nice in Hawkins, where people might remember, and since he got old enough to be left alone the “family vacations” seem to have evaporated in favour of his dad heading somewhere where there's bound to be pretty girls— usually in *skimpy* clothes— his mom close on the man's heels and him left behind— With Billy it's more that he— Wow. Ok. *Lame*. It's more that he wants to *help* the guy, and less the mortification of watching his dad be unreasonable to some poor schmuck who's done *nothing* to deserve it.

He really needs to talk to Robin— he just hopes she's not too mad at him.

19. Chapter 19

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for internalised homophobia and fear of violent homophobic reprisal, mentions of past situations where guys have tried to take advantage of drunk girls, please let me know if I missed any.

Sorry I pretty much disappeared after posting the last chapter and didn't reply to anyone's comments. I have no excuse other than depression sucks and can make one pretty much entirely useless. Thank you all for reading though, and for the comments and kudos, they do always mean a lot to me! There was a moment there when the story had exactly 300 comments and kudos at the same time, which I thought was pretty neat. (Also, please forgive Robin's reluctance to state the obvious in this chapter. Billy's gotta work a bit harderfirst.)

After ringing her and asking her to come over he gets started on yet more oatmeal raisin cookies— which, ok, *bribery*. He can't even pretend it's anything otherwise. Like, *worst case scenario* if she decides she doesn't want anything to do with him anymore because of the *Billy* thing she might change her mind if he offers to make her cookies all the time, right? They are good. He's not just kidding himself.

Is he?

No. No. He could almost believe the others were just being nice, but *Billy*—

When Robin arrives it's to the smell of cookies in the oven and a cup of coffee all ready for her. He admires her for a moment— not in a *creepy boy way*— just in a *happy to see her way*. Her fashion choices

now that they're free of the terrible Scoops uniform continue to be both practical and cool in ways he'd never have thought of. Like today— black jeans, a t-shirt with some band he's never heard of's logo on the front— and she's got what looks like the spiky black collar of what must be the tiniest, *fiercest* chihuahua ever wrapped around the bun on her head. Wow. If she hates him after this—

He is not sure he'll be able to cope.

He sits her down at the table— 'Ok, dingus. What's wrong? You look like someone just gave you a puppy— only to take it off you and run it over in front of you instead.'

His face scrunches up automatically at the image. He can't look *that* bad. He's pretty sure that he— like every sensible person— would either be crying on the floor or chasing the puppy murderer with his bat at that point. 'Don't be mad at me—' is how he begins. Because that is the number one concern he has right now.

'Ok, *that* is not how I want to hear a sentence start— *ever*. What's wrong Stevie? Is it Tommy H. and Carol—? You *didn't*— did you?'

'No, it's not—' what, is she thinking they came around and he accidentally sucked Tommy's dick or something again? 'No. No— I think they're still—' he shrugs, kind of uncomfortable. *Avoiding him*. Yeah, aside from Carol in the Big Buy looking at him like he's filth she just scraped off her shoe— fuck. Also, *why the hell did Tommy attack Billy?* Talk about suicidal. Tommy's a lot of things but he's actually *not stupid*. His grades are like— almost up there with Nancy's — Enough avoidance. 'You know how I'm bisexual?'

She nods. 'Don't worry, I have not forgotten that *Steve Harrington* is a *bisexual*.'

'Ok, but maybe can you not be like *that* about it—' when she's all *Steve Harrington is a bisexual/can cook/is an amazing dweeb/likes, like, the worst Queen songs* he always feels like Steve Harrington is someone that he's never met before and probably wouldn't want to hang out with him anyway. 'Um—' probably best to get it over with, '
—

IhavethestupidestcrushonBillyandIdon'tknowwhattodobecauseheisseriouslys

—

He sees her brows twitch, eyes flicking back and forth as she tries to work out what he just blurted, before— ‘Ah.’

Wait— She *does not look surprised*. ‘What do you mean “Ah”?’ he demands.

‘Do you want me to pretend I didn’t notice?—’ she asks, tilting her head and looking at him, ‘Because that’s what I originally planned to do, but I seem to have— Ok. I blew it. I admit it.’

His brain kind of stalls for a minute before suddenly all he can think is if *she* noticed what if *Billy* noticed too— and then he starts panicking. He says— *something*— but honestly she’s probably got as much of an idea as he does at this point, and he has *no* idea what the collection of blurted syllables that just escaped his mouth actually mean—

It takes her a moment to work out what he’s panicking about, but then she immediately rushes to reassure him that just because *she* noticed doesn’t mean Billy has any clue. ‘You’d know if he knew, Stevie *trust me*, you would know—’ she keeps saying.

She’s right, of course, because Billy would *kill him*— but when he tells her that she just laughs at him. ‘No, no— Stevie don’t look like *that* —’ she manages in between chuckles. ‘—He wouldn’t *kill you*. I mean — I don’t *think* he’d kill you— it’s more that I don’t think he’d know what to do, like, *at all*. I think it’d *break* him—’

Which— actually, that kind of *hurts*. And she must see that, because she keeps trying to say she doesn’t mean it like that— but then not explaining how she *does* mean it.

The cookies are soon ready, so he can distract himself getting them out of the oven, shifting each one to the cooling racks with kind of jerkier than he’d like movements. He kind of wishes he hadn’t invited Robin over—

Then she’s wrapping her arms around him from behind and saying, ‘Sorry Stevie’ softly, with her face buried in his still unstyled hair.

‘You’re right though,’ he concedes. ‘He wouldn’t know how to handle it. It’d— He’d be so *disgusted*. Creeped out. He’d think I was— a pervert and a freak and—’

She snorts out a breath against the side of his neck, still hanging off him. ‘Who cares what that jerk thinks? What do you see in him anyway? He’s like, *psycho*— you heard what he did to— actually, *no*, now is probably not the best time to— or *ever*— but— um— yeah, I mean, I know everyone thinks he’s *hot*— but it’s not just you being shallow, is it?’ she sounds almost *hopeful*.

He shrugs, hiding behind his hair, trying to avoid her gaze on the side of his face.

She pokes him in the ribs, making him squirm. ‘Come on Stevie, tell your aunt Robin why you think that Hargrove boy is so dreamy—’ a pause and then she shudders. ‘Wow— that was just— a *dead on* impression of my aunt Marge. I did not know I could do that.’

He grabs one of the cookies and waves it at her. ‘If you stop asking about Billy I’ll give you a cookie—’ he offers.

‘You’ll give me one anyway, don’t kid yourself,’ she says, and, ok, he *does*, but that’s just because she snatches it from his grasp and he lets her have it in the hope that if she’s stuffing her face she’ll forget he basically invited her over to tell her he has a crush on Billy and now doesn’t want to talk about it.

She leans against the counter next to him as he transfers the rest of the cookies to the cooling rack, snatching another one when she’s finished the first. He still can’t quite look at her.

He feels kind of guilty and wrong and *sick*.

He doesn’t want to *break* Billy—

The next thing he knows she’s wagglng a white cylinder under his nose and his brain is thinking, *what, weed?* but before he can snatch it from her she’s pulling it back out of his reach.

‘Nah-uh,’ she says. ‘This— and the *others*— are getting lit *only* when you give me even *one* good reason why Billy Hargrove is worth

having a crush on.'

He makes a plaintive noise at her. It's been— *ages*. He has missed getting high— but Carol used to be the one who'd buy it for the three of them and *after* he'd suddenly found himself in the awkward position of being too much of a loser for any of the cool kids to seem to want to sell to, and too much of a "cool kid" to know which of the so-called losers to ask. Anyway, he's got his parents' wine cellar, all the bottles he's rescued and hidden, all that cheap but *good* wine from strange little European vineyards no one has ever heard of that his mother buys and then his father demands be removed from the house before someone sees and thinks he can't afford the good stuff.

'Come on Stevie, tell me—' she teases, wagging the joint at him.

'Robin,' he whines, making *gimme* hands.

She does not relent. She doesn't even hand it over when he offers to trade her for a cookie— though she does look a bit *torn*— and in the end he blurts out something like, 'I don't know, sometimes he's *nice to me*.'

He *is*, that's the thing. The worst thing. Like— part of him thinks it would be enough to have someone who was sometimes *nice* to him, who'd hold him like Billy did the night before— not all the time, that's probably asking too much really— who wouldn't call him names and would acknowledge they were a *thing* and wouldn't tell him he's *bullshit* or *cheat on him*— and maybe who would let him get them off every now and then. It's been feeling more and more like expecting anything *more* is— yeah. Probably not going to happen.

That would be about as good as he's ever had it anyway.

He could feel Nancy was one step out the door pretty much their entire relationship— and God, it used to make him feel *sick* sometimes— and the stuff with Tommy and Carol—

'That can't be it,' she says, looking at him with big, kind of *sad*, eyes. 'He beat your face in, and even if he *didn't* he's not *that* nice— you can't just like him because he's *nice to you*. That can't be what *nice to you* looks like— *I'm* nicer to you— not that I mean— *you know what I*

mean— Surely he can't be so much nicer to you than, like, *everyone else*. Come on. Give me another reason—'

He shrugs, but doesn't go into the way that Billy has been so much nicer to him than almost *everyone* recently. Ok, not *her*, but— There's too much— There's stuff he doesn't want to say out loud, or *admit* to her, there. So, what's another reason he has a crush on Billy—? 'He smells nice?' he offers. 'He's— *even you admitted he's hot.*'

'Yeah, but that doesn't mean I want to lick him or anything,' she says, face scrunching up at the thought.

He feels himself go red. Mind going places he never wants to tell her about. Thinking about Billy's dick— and it is such a *nice* dick. It'd probably feel really good in his mouth— He feels his own twitch. Blood headed where he doesn't want it right now—

At least the terror had kept it at bay last night and this morning, but without Billy in front of him to remind him of why it is such a *bad idea*—

Even as scared as he was part of him had kind of wanted to, when Billy was still asleep, still wrapped around him, dick hot and hard under his thigh— but aside from the fact that Billy would have pretty much *murdered him* the moment he woke up, that's not the sort of thing you should ever do without *asking*. Without them saying yes— You'd think that would be obvious, but then you'd also think he'd never had to help *remove* guys from parties who hadn't gotten the message.

Thinking about stuff like that makes him tense. *Tenser*. So he tries, 'And he's got, you know, nice *hands*,' in case that'll convince her to hand over the weed.

She gives him a *look*. 'What's so nice about them? They just look like *hands* to me.'

Big, strong hands with broad palms, short nails, and practical fingers. The kind of hands that look like they can do *things*. Things like fix the sink or move furniture or chop wood for the fireplace instead of calling someone in to do it— *Manly* hands.

Billy's so *strong*.

Billy's—

'Robin, come on,' he whines. 'I have given you—' he thinks back, counting, '*Four* reasons why I think Billy is hot— hand over the weed.'

'I said one *good* reason—' she begins, before relenting, 'But I suppose four not really good reasons might as well count as one good one.'

They take some of the cookies with them into the den, curling up together on the couch while she fusses with the joint and a well-used book of matches, the striker almost worn bare. It makes him think of Billy's Zippo— the effortless *cool* of the way he lights his endless cigarettes.

He groans, resting his burning face against her shoulder. She manages to get the joint lit, wrapping one arm around his shoulder and waving it at him once she'd done with it. He takes it from her, shaking his head when she asks, 'You wanna put on some music or something?'

Hah. If anything he kind of wants to fucking *disappear* right now—

He *hates* the thought of being something that could *break* someone, *anyone*, but *Billy*— Funny. He's never really been *ashamed* of liking guys before. He probably just didn't think about it, think it through—

Later they're on the floor, Queen on the stereo—because he's *boring*, *ok Erica*, *he gets it*— and she curls herself around him and keeps telling him she didn't mean it, not like *that*, that she's *sorry*, and he tells her it's *ok*, because it *is*. It's all *ok*.

He's ok.

20. Chapter 20

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: Internalised homophobia, ableist language, emotional child abuse, please tell me if I missed any.

Yay a chapter! You're all such lovely, supportive people and I can't thank you enough for the kind comments on the last chapter. I hope you enjoy this one, apparently the fic has decided what it wants for now is further adventures in Steve's high-functioning depression so we may be with him for a few chapters yet. Thank you all for reading and I hope you're all safe and having a good time!

Then he doesn't hear from Billy, or see him around town, all week, all weekend, and then into the next week. It makes him feel— Day to day this pervasive sense of guilt starts lingering, like he's done something really, really, *really* wrong— and not even Max mentioning Billy for the first time since whatever has happened— when the kids showing up like usual to watch some movie and eat anything he'll make them the next Thursday makes him feel any better.

And it was so hard waiting for Max to finally mention Billy— because no way has he been game to ask about him, in case she reads more into the question than he wants her to. In her— *Maxish*— way she tells him that Billy's been really *weird*— but she thinks it's because stuff is even tenser than it usually is between him and his dad and she's worried they're going to have a *massive* fight— and he's also been working as many hours at the pool as he can since it's open again after it closed for a couple of days because Joey Mackinson had terrible diarrhoea in it and broke everything— *wow, gross, he **did not** need to hear that*— and she thinks maybe he's planning to get his own place— though she rushes to add that she doesn't think he'll leave Hawkins as if *she* knows about his *feelings* too— which he doubts.

She's too *nice* to him. If she knew she'd be— Yeah.

It all sounds— well. Not necessarily *reasonable*, but like it could make sense. Like Billy could be just pulling away from him because of family stuff— it hurts. A bit. Like, he feels like the blond should be able to turn to him for help if he needs it— but then. Billy is *Billy*.

He hopes Billy is ok.

Though maybe it's not just worrying that Billy is grossed out by him that's making him feel— the way he's feeling.

See, his dad rang this Tuesday.

Yeah.

Not that he found out until he got home from Robin's— via a visit to Heather in the hospital. It's good, *great* even— Heather, that is. She's showing signs of waking up which is amazing really. He'd been starting to think maybe she wasn't going to— And maybe that wasn't just him. He thinks maybe he's the only one visiting her. Tommy's parents are apparently back off wherever they go on their summer vacations and he's never seen Tommy around, so—? Sometimes he feels so *bad* for her.

So it had been a good day up until that point. A really— well, maybe not entirely *good*, because of. Well. Yeah— *But* he'd almost forgotten entirely all about Billy and everything, between the good news about Heather and the great time he'd had at Robin's—

She can play *so many* different instruments. It's— It's— *wow*. How did he not notice for all those years that she's so *amazing*? And smart. And *talented*— and, ok, she's not *perfect* on all of them, but she *can* play them, some of them amazingly well, while he can't even play *one*. Clever and smart and interested in so many things he's never even thought about. Books. Movies—

He is so glad she's still his friend.

He hopes it lasts.

Anyway, yeah, once he'd finally gotten home it was only to discover

a message from his dad on the machine.

The man's sending him some money to pay the "housekeeper" (Mrs. Pierson), and "handy man" (Richie Lewis), to get everything "in order", since he and his mom might be coming back after visiting some friends in the Hamptons for a few weeks— as well as sending him a few thousand *extra* he can spend on "whatever you want Steven. Buy yourself something *nice*. Buy something nice for a girl. You got a girl—? Probably not. Never your strong point, was it kiddo? Who cares. If you don't have one now you can buy one with the money I'm sending. Those Hawkins girls are *easy*, even for a *retard* like you—"

It's like—

He should be grateful. Apparently his dad has forgotten he was supposed to be *paying his own way*, in fact his allowance might start up again from the way his dad put things, but instead of gratitude he feels— *Empty*. Like all his efforts were meaningless. All those *months* — His dad has always had this way of reducing him to *nothing*.

At least he met *Robin*. It was all worth it to meet Robin—

But between worrying about Billy— both that the guy *noticed* and now wants nothing to do with him *and* that Billy and the guy's dad will have the "massive fight" and Billy will get *hurt*— and feeling like crap because of his own dad he's been— *oh*, and *Robin* has been weird. She's been oddly— *gentle*? with him, and it's making him nervous. Like she's working to telling him she doesn't want to be his friend anymore— yeah— and, of course, there's the weird way everyone— like, everyone from school and everything, not their *parents*— are now being *nice* to him again when a couple of weeks ago they wouldn't have pissed on him if he was on fire and it's— *good* on one hand. But kind of— it makes him feel a bit— because they *weren't*, and it was— hell— it was *so long*— and now— Well.

With everything he's not been at his best.

Still, *big smile Stevie*.

The— is it even an upside? It's a *something* side— maybe it's just a

thing— of the kids coming around that Thursday, when Max mentioned Billy, was what happened when he ended up driving Will and El back to the Byers' house. It got late while Dustin and Erica were arguing about the merits of Star Wars, *again*— by now he's pretty sure she's teasing him, but why she'd want to when it makes the boy *so annoying* is beyond him— and the two couples went off to canoodle in various parts of the house "Pants *on* guys, I will be checking. No one is getting pregnant in this house and making me explain it to their parents" and Will lurked around in the kitchen watching him clean up after the mess he made cooking— poor kid. He seems so *miserable* recently. Anyway, when he dropped the two kids home he got to talk to Mrs Byers for a bit so he's now volunteered himself to help the combined Byers-Hoppers move house today.

Honestly Mrs Byers is one of his favourite people, but there's no real excuse for him to hang around her all the time so he doesn't see her that often. Just, mainly, when he's dropping off kids. She's— Sometimes he wishes his mom was more like her— and wow, that is not something he ever wants his mom hearing about.

His mom is glamorous and competent and ruthless and completely on the ball— and Mrs Byers is— *Mrs Byers*— but he has never gotten the impression she is disappointed in her kids or ever wants them to be anything other than what they are. You can pretty much *feel* the love she has for Jonathan and Will— and El— and it's—

Yeah.

Anyway, he'd dropped the kids off— waiting in the car to make sure they got inside safely— and she came scurrying out to talk to him. Mainly to ask him to thank his mom for putting in such a generous offer on her house— which, *what?* Ok, not that unbelievable. She's got plenty of money of her own and she does love a bit of property development— and it's not like she even knows he knows the Byers as well as he does, so there's really no reason for her to have gone out of her way to ring up and tell him, *but— what?*— and then babbled a bit about life being too short, and realising that now, and how the government must have made sure the insurance paid out on Hopper's cabin, and how the old Christofferson place has just been put up for sale— Maude Christofferson having apparently died in the

nursing home, and “it’s a real pity no one said anything about how sick she was, because she was always such a lovely lady and I would have liked a chance to say goodbye,” and everyone knows her son Paul has no intention of ever moving back to Hawkins— and even though it needs work, it’s such a nice house and such a good design with all the kids, and such a short settlement, on *both* properties, so— Yeah. The Byers and Hoppers are permanently moving into the old Christofferson house together and apparently Mrs Byers and Hopper are actually properly, officially, a *thing* instead of just whatever it was they were before.

So, it’s Saturday morning and he has cookies, a carrot cake, sandwiches, and coffee ready in case anyone gets hungry, his car otherwise empty to transport stuff, sensible clothes on, and is ready to help— like it’s some bake sale or charity drive or whatever else his mom might have roped him into back when he saw her more than once or twice a year—

Oh Goddamn is this going to be awkward if Nancy is also ready to help.

Things between them have just— Wow. They might as well be strangers these days. The last time he spoke to her was— *yeah*— and the time before that— He thinks maybe he asked how she was in the parking lot of the mall *that night* but he can’t really remember.

Maybe if he sticks with the kids—

Does that make him a creep? That he’d prefer spending time with a bunch of obnoxious fourteen-year-olds than his ex-girlfriend? At least he has friends that are kind of his own age now— or *he has Robin*, even if she is almost two years younger than him. And doing something with her parents today. And maybe getting tired of him— Yeah. Anyway. Billy is— He doesn’t know what Billy is to him right now.

One day someone will invent a pill that completely stops you having feelings, and on that day he thinks he will be first in line.

Still. For now. *Big smile Stevie.*

21. Chapter 21

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For mentions of child abuse, also homophobia.

So, we're still with Steve for this chapter, and, unfortunately, still without Billy, but hopefully you find it interesting anyway. Thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and the kudos and putting up with the rather irregular posting schedule. You're all awesome!

Mrs Byers greets him when he pulls up, and he immediately goes to help her carry the box she's holding— and almost dropping when she tries to awkwardly wave at him and carry it at the same time— to the truck Hopper hired. 'It's good to see you Steve,' she says to him. 'I don't think I've said how thankful we are that you've been looking out for the kids the way you have, but we are—' a little pause, her eyes on his face, and then she adds, 'You know you can come around whenever you want? I know things are kind of awkward with Nancy — and *Jonathan*—' a little shrug, '—but still. *You can come around whenever you want.* I know your mom— and your dad— haven't been in town much recently.'

He thinks he manages to brush off the offer gracefully— Not because he doesn't want to. Actually he kind of *really wants to*. But because— Well. It'd be *weird*. And *needy*. And— He's *fine*. He is.

She tells him he can help the kids out when he asks what she wants him to do, so he heads towards the house, greeting Hopper on the way— the man carrying a box that he deposits in the truck before catching Mrs Byers in his arms and pulling her in for a thorough kiss that he feels uncomfortable watching— He leaves them behind, her giggling and swatting at the Chief, the two of them the picture of a happy couple.

Inside he manages a kind of awkward greeting with Nancy and Jonathan— both working to pack up the kitchen— and he wonders for a moment if Jonathan should be moving stuff, since he was so recently shot in the arm. But it's not his business really, is it?— before Mike commandeers him to carry boxes of El's things— already packed up from salvaging them from Hopper's cabin— out to the truck.

It's good. Easy. Something to do that means he doesn't have to *think* — It also means he doesn't have to go back out to the Byers horrible shed— or spend too much time inside the house. He thinks it was just — *that night*, and the *Demogorgon*, and— Wow. So many bad things have happened here— but every time he's been inside the place has felt *off*. Like something's *looking* at him from out of the corner of his eye. Not cool.

It's good they're moving. He doesn't like the thought of Mrs Byers and Will and El— and even *Jonathan*— sleeping in this place.

'Billy's being a weirdo,' Max tells him when they're both taking boxes out at the same time.

'What do you mean?' he asks, and then, 'Is everything ok? His dad hasn't—?'

She shakes her head. '*Neil's* being a weirdo too— did I tell you Billy made him back down that night after he went to the party at the Daileys?' and then before he can answer with *no*, and also *please tell me more*, 'I think whatever's— I dunno— *brewing*— between them is going to be seriously **bad**. I hope Neil doesn't hurt Billy too much— I *hate him*, you know?'

'I know,' he replies, helping her stack the box in the truck, then pulling her aside, out of earshot of anyone else for a moment. 'I hate him too— and I haven't even met him. I think—' he doesn't like the thought of Billy's dad trying to hurt him, wonders if he should tell Hopper, wonders if Billy would forgive him if he did, but most of all — 'Billy is pretty strong. I don't think his dad will have an easy time of hurting him—' Billy might just turn into a monster if he tries.

She nods, but says, 'I know— but sometimes he just *freezes up* when

Neil goes for him— I hate it. Oh my God Steve I hate it *so much*. I wish my mom had never— I mean, *why*? One look at him, *Neil*, and I knew he was bad news, I *told her I didn't like him*, but she just acted like I was being *difficult* because he wasn't my dad. It wasn't that he wasn't my dad. Ugh,' she groans in annoyance.

Oh God, poor girl. Between Billy at his worst and his dad— it must be so hard living in that house sometimes. 'If something happens,' he tells her, hunching down a little to meet her eyes, '*Anything*. Neil hurts Billy, Neil hurts *you*, your mom— *anything*— you can ring Hopper ok? He will be *right there*— and ring me too, if you want. I will do *everything* I can to help you out. Help you *both* out.'

'Fuck,' she breathes, and he sees her rub quickly at her eyes, before suddenly she's hugging him— just for a second. Arms wrapped *tight* around him before she lets him go to almost lose his balance— wow that girl is *strong*— 'Thanks Steve.'

They stand there awkwardly for a moment longer before he brings himself to ask. 'How is he? Billy? I haven't heard from him all week —' *Almost two weeks now*.

She groans again. 'I told you he's being a weirdo, right?' he nods. 'Yeah. Well *he's being a weirdo*. He keeps, like, *stopping and staring at nothing*. And he's jumpy. And *cranky as all hell*. And— I dunno. He's been out drinking a few times with "Adam"— whoever that is— and I think Brad Dailey? But I don't know. How many Brads are there in this town?— and you and I both know he doesn't get on with other guys— *weird*.'

'Adam from the pool?' he asks.

She shrugs. 'I guess. He just says "Adam" like I'm supposed to know who that is.'

Brad Dailey is the only Brad remotely their age— though there's older Brads and a couple of younger Brads— and the addition of Adam— meaning Adam Laramie who works with Billy at the pool— would make sense. Brad and Adam have been friends almost as long as he was friends with Tommy H. and Carol— Why Billy's hanging out with the two of them he has no idea— but they're both honestly

good guys, so he's not too worried they're up to something.

No, instead he feels—

Jealous.

And kind of even crappier.

And then Mike appears to glare at him and tell them both off for slacking, hands on hips, head jutting forward— looking entirely too much like one of the too-skinny women his mom used to do charity things with. Max rolls her eyes at the boy, gives him a sympathetic look, but still lets the kid shoo them both back inside.

He hears Mike asking Max what they were talking about, why she was *hugging* him— and then smirks a little at the loud and annoyed volley of *Oh My God, none of your business, stop being so nosy-s* it earns him.

The next couple of hours seem to pass in a daze of wandering back and forth between house and truck, sometimes stopping for a while to help pack or tape up a box, chatting idly with the kids— all present except Erica— who apparently felt helping *Byers* move house was beneath her— or at least so according to *Lucas*, so not exactly a — hmm—*objective* is the right one, isn't it? Not subjective. *Lucas* is a *subjective* observer, not an *objective* one— biased or whatever.

The truck Hopper hired isn't that big— so they're planning on it taking a couple of loads. Mainly boxes and the furniture from the living room in the first load, mainly furniture in the second— boxes that don't get packed in the first load being transported in the wide collection of cars parked around the street— Nancy's mom's, Jonathan's, Mrs Byers', Hopper's, his *own*.

By the time the truck is almost full for the first time he's ended up in Will's room, somehow being roped into packing up the kid's clothes — which feels *weird*, but— watching out of the corner of his eye the way the boy keeps hesitating over books, comics, his D&D stuff— the poor kid looks even more miserable than usual, and that's saying something.

They can both hear Lucas and Max laughing at Dustin as the three come in with a box from the shed, the sound of Jonathan and Nancy talking quietly in Jonathan's room, the sound of Mrs Byers laughing at something Hopper just said— It seems like it should be— that there should be a sense of connection between everyone. But somehow it's like it's just the two of them, cut off from everyone else. Maybe even cut off from each other—

And then Mike and El are barrelling into the room, Mike chattering away a mile a minute, walking over to Will— but not looking at him — reaching past him to the pile of books he's lingering over, making full-body contact with the other boy for a moment, pinning him in against the shelf, before grabbing whatever book it was, waving it at El, and the two scurrying from the room.

He sees the look on Will's face. The blush. The way the poor kid then hunches over— and he has a burst of sympathy, the memory of many an unwanted boner when Tommy used to deliberately pull shit like that on him— because he and Carol thought it was— *funny*? Who knows— and Will's body language screams that he's trying to hide what's happening, before realising he can't, realising *he's* seen everything— because he was too distracted by it all to look away, to give the poor kid some dignity— and then *humiliation*.

Then *fear*.

Big eyes on his face.

Will knows he saw, understood what just happened— and then he remembers why it's not just the same as if it was El or Max or some other girl— It was Mike. They both know it was Mike— and even if he forgot for a moment, they both live in a world where it's not safe to be getting unwanted boners from being pressed against things by your *male* best friend.

Shit. He has to say something—

'I don't think there's much room in the truck, but we might be able to fit a couple of your boxes if you're ready to—' Mrs Byers enters the room already talking.

Will's eyes immediately snap to his mother as she sighs and looks around, commenting on how he's barely got anything packed. Somehow Mrs Byers is looking even more frazzled than usual— but at the same time she seems *happy*.

'Most of his clothes are ready,' he says, as if that will shield Will from even the mild parental disapproval that's making him hunch even further into himself. Fuck. He needs to *fix* this. He needs to get Will alone to talk— to make it clear that it's *ok*— well. That he has terrible taste in boys, if the Mike thing was more than— you know— just any boy rubbing up against him like that— Then again, he has been reliably informed by Robin that *he* has terrible taste in boys too — but other than *that* it's all ok.

So he offers to hang back, help Will pack, then load it all into the beemer and drive them both to the Christofferson place— for a moment he wonders if the boy will protest, will want to get away from him and hide like he'd probably want to if the roles were reversed, but if anything Will seems *resigned*.

'This is very nice of you Steve,' Mrs Byers says as he walks her out to the truck.

'It's fine. Happy to help,' he says with a shrug. He's got no plans to be interrupted. It's funny, he feels weirdly nervous— though he shouldn't be. It's fine. He just needs to make sure Will is ok and then neither of them have to talk about this stuff again unless they want to —

As everyone is climbing into the various vehicles they're taking it occurs to him to rush over to the beemer and collect the food and coffee—leaving aside a few cookies for Will— handing it all over to Mrs Byers so they can take a break if they want while they're unloading. Her gratitude is so— It makes him feel good. As does the way she rambles on about how good the last lot of cookies he gave them were—

Then Hopper starts trying to get her to hurry up, and she gets distracted arguing— in the happiest way he's ever seen anyone argue — with the man, and the argument— if you can call it that— continues as she climbs into the truck next to him and everyone

drives off.

22. Chapter 22

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for homophobia and internalised homophobia, also emotional child abuse. Please let me know if I've missed any.

Part 1 of Steve-Will bonding time. I thought I'd post this bit now, as it pretty much works as a chapter even though there'll be more with Steve and Will in the next one, because I'll be busy for the rest of the week and maybe next one? Not sure yet, and I wanted to get this out while I could. Thank you all, as always, for being so wonderful! I hope you enjoy, even if it's a bit depressing.

He watches them until they're out of sight, apprehension building. Shit. He'll probably have to *tell* Will— Not about the Billy thing, but about the—

No details though. Just—

And no mentioning *Tommy*. Yeah, in part because Tommy would *hate* people knowing, but also he gets the impression Will is not the kind of person impressed by a jackass like Tommy H. any more than Robin is.

Hah.

He really is a *jackass*.

—

Thinking about it too long still makes him—

Yeah. No point upsetting himself before what could turn into an upsetting conversation.

He creeps back into the house, kind of wondering if Will's still going to be there. It's— He feels like the *bad guy*. Wow this stuff *sucks*.

But Will is where he left him, looking the picture of misery. As he comes into the room the boy looks up and for a moment he sees *defiance* before the kid speaks, 'I was going to try and convince you that you didn't see anything, that you're wrong about whatever you think you saw, but *what's the point?* I get it, ok? I'm gross. I'm *disgusting*. I'm a freak. I'm— it's not like I want to kiss *you* or anything, so you don't need to worry, you don't need to beat me up or— or— I just— I *can't help it!* I don't *want* to be like this, I *never wanted*— I *know*. Ok. I—' and now Will's crying.

It makes him feel *terrible*. Like this is all his fault— 'No—' he begins, trying to explain, but the boy just keeps talking, babbling ugly, half coherent self-hate, and the more he tries to reason with him the louder and more upset Will becomes.

It triggers that urge to comfort that seems to end up with him hugging guys even though it's not really a *guy* thing to do— Tommy, Billy— though with *Will* it's different— and honestly— Actually, he almost doesn't believe Billy even *let him*— and— he reaches for Will, but the kid makes a wounded, scared little noise and flinches back— and now he feels even *worse*.

'Will, come on man,' he tries. 'I'm not going to— *fuck*. I would *never hurt you*, not for *that*, not for *anything*. It's ok. I promise it's ok—'

'It's *not!*' the kid wails. 'I'm a fucking *faggot*.'

It's ugly, isn't it, that word— He doesn't let himself think about it much but honestly, underneath it all, he *hates* it whenever it slips out of his dad's mouth, Billy's mouth— though most of the time the guy doesn't seem to mean it— maybe not that time he snarled it at *Dustin*— shit. Yeah. He can *never* let Billy find out— but most of the time— Hearing it from Will. Cruelly self-directed—

'I am too!' he yelps, and then, 'Kind of. *Half*. I mean—' wow, he can feel himself going red right now. It's a strange and awkward thing to admit. And even though Will just called himself a— *that word*— he almost expects the boy to be grossed out, to react the way Will

expected *him* to react. ‘I’m *bisexual*,’ he eventually manages. ‘I like *both*. So, um—’

The kid stops, tears running down his face, eyes *massive*, ‘What?!’

‘I’m bisexual?’ he repeats, but the anxiety of the situation makes it come out like a question. ‘Fuck! Kid, look, I like both girls *and* guys —’

A pause, and then, ‘Does *Nancy know*?’ eyes even *bigger*, as if that was possible.

‘No!’ he yelps. ‘No, she— *please don’t tell her*.’ What if she thinks even *worse* of him— Oh God.

The next thought that crosses the kid’s mind is apparently, ‘Is Billy your *boyfriend*?!’

‘Oh God please don’t tell *him* either, he’ll kill me!’ is about all he manages in face of that.

Will blinks. A tear— obviously not fresh, but from before— wow he is feeling *bad* about all of this— squeezes out between his lashes and joins the others on his cheeks. ‘Since *when*? No way. No way is *Steve Harrington* bisexual— if you’re just saying that to make me *feel better* —’

‘Why would I do that?’ he blurts out. And *why* does everyone say his name like that when they discover he’s bisexual— Well. Robin and Will, but— why is it so unbelievable that “Steve Harrington” is—

Whatever it is he is. All the things he is.

Will opens his mouth like he’s got an answer, but then hesitates, doubt creeping over his face. The kid blinks. Mouth shuts. Then opens again, ‘Wait— so does *Dustin* know?’

‘*What?*’ he squeaks. ‘No. *No way. Please do not tell him either*— Oh my God kid, don’t tell *anyone*. The only ones who know are you and me and Robin.’

‘Robin?’ the boy’s eyebrows climb up his face. ‘Your *girlfriend* knows?’

The way it's said pretty much screams "if your girlfriend knows you're bisexual why is she still your girlfriend?" Which is bad enough, but—

'Robin is *not* my girlfriend,' he sighs out. Can't a guy and a girl be friends without everyone being so *weird* about it?

'Because you're bisexual?' Will straight out asks.

'No!' he yelps, scrubbing both hands roughly through his hair. 'It's not— Will, kid, it's *nothing* like that. Ok? Robin doesn't think being bisexual— or *gay*— is dirty or gross or whatever it is you're thinking — it's just—' he can't exactly tell the kid Robin's a lesbian without her saying he can, so— 'You can be friends with people without wanting more than that, can't you?' he thinks for a moment, *Mike* isn't the best example, but maybe— 'You don't want to kiss Dustin, do you?— unless you do. In which case that's *fine*. It's—' oh God this is bad. Especially since he's been feeling gross and wrong and guilty for his own— for *Billy*— *but*. This is not about him. This is about *Will*. He doesn't want the kid to feel bad. To feel— So instead of how he feels about things, the things he tells himself, he needs to focus on how he wishes things were, the things he'd secretly like someone to tell *him*.

'There's *nothing* wrong with being attracted to other guys—' he tries. 'It's just how you— how *we*— are. We're not dirty, or insane, or diseased, or *hurting* anyone— I mean, *seriously kid*, who would you ever try to hurt? You're like. You're the *nicest*— Even *Billy* likes you, and he pretty much hates anything with a dick—'

And then Will bursts into tears again and he starts panicking again, apologizing, but then Will is lurching at him and sort of awkwardly hugging him/collapsing against him, so he wraps his arms around the boy and they list over into a pile on the floor.

After a moment he realises it's a different sort of crying. Less the horrible, scared, self-condemnatory tears of before, more— *sad*. Will seems sad. It makes him feel like he's about to start crying too, but he tries to bite it back. It's not—

All this isn't about him. It's about *Will*.

He does his best to comfort the kid.

And he learns a few more things. Like how the other guys know what Will is— even if they never talk about it really. About how they're good about it— except Will's scared they're only good about it, only don't reject him, because of what happened. The Upside Down. Because what happened makes him something even more *other*— something they have to be careful of. That Will's also scared that Mike *knows*— not just that Will likes boys, that Will likes *Mike*— and only puts up with him out of guilt or something— and there he learns what the dark haired boy said, about it not being his fault that Will doesn't want to kiss girls— and it makes him wince. Imagine what that must have felt like— And that sometimes Will thinks he hates Mike as much as he wants to kiss him— that being around the other boy *hurts*, and Mike just doesn't make it any easier. And Will is trying so *hard* to be ok— not just about being gay, but about *everything*. Trying so hard to just keep going, to make believe everything is the way it always was, but it's *not* and the poor kid is getting sick of it. Sick of pretending. Sick of who he is. Sick of trying so hard to keep everyone together when they just seem to want to couple off and split up and—

Leave him alone.

And the way Will isn't even sure he wants to be who he is anymore. A *loser*— the kid's own words, not how he would have put it— interested in comics and nerdy bullshit and drawing and—

'I don't even know if I want any of it anymore, so how can I pack it?!' the kid sighs, gesturing around the room. 'I mean, you have to grow up sometime, *right?* Leave all *this* behind—'

Oh God is he out of his depth.

'You're still a *kid*,' he points out. 'You don't have to decide that kind of stuff *now*.'

'I'm not that much of a kid,' Will says, 'I'm only, like, *four years* younger than you—'

'*Five*,' he corrects automatically, but Will isn't listening.

‘—You must have been an awkward kid at some point, you must have, you know, decided to *grow up*, you can’t have just been *Steve Harrington* forever.’

‘Why do people say my name like that?’ he muses, before shaking it off. ‘It’s not so simple, you know? I never had to decide to “grow out” of what I was into as a kid or anything, because when my mom decided I was too old for something she’d get rid of it—’ like the way she’d stripped down and redone his room to her image of “teenage boy” a few months before he asked Nancy out. He feels his face scrunch up into an unhappy grimace and tries to smooth it back into something calm and grown up and *comforting*, ‘— and there are some things she got rid of that I wish she hadn’t, even if they were *childish*.’ Like the teddy bear his grandad had given him when he was born—and, ok, most of the time he’d kept it in the cupboard, but that was more because if his dad ever saw it he’d make some *comment* and less because he didn’t value the thing.

Will is staring at him. ‘That is messed up,’ the kid breathes out, making him flinch.

‘Yeah, well—’ he shrugs, looking away.

Will nudges him gently with his shoulder, and when he looks over at the kid, the boy’s got a funny look on his face that doesn’t quite match the words, ‘So what do you think I should do?’

He glances around the room, at the stuff still unpacked, then back at Will. ‘You should probably pack it— but that doesn’t mean you have to *unpack* it. You can always leave it all in the boxes, see how you feel without it?’ That’s sensible, right? He hopes so. He hopes he’s *helping*. ‘There’s nothing wrong with wanting to explore who you are, you don’t have to stay the same— but there’s also nothing wrong with who you are right now,’ wow this is getting sentimental, but, ‘You really are a good guy Will— and you’re not a *loser*. Take it from me, I was— well, you know what I was. I was *Steve Harrington*—’ great, now he’s doing it himself, ‘—and it wasn’t that great, and most of the other *Steve Harringtons* in this town are— a lot of them are really shitty people— or, if not *shitty*, then— *shallow*. It’s not worth it to be them. I’ve liked myself a lot better since I became whoever it is that’s not *Steve Harrington*.’

‘You’re still Steve Harrington,’ Will says, shoulder bumping him again, ‘You’re just not *Steve Harrington*.’

‘I have no idea what that means,’ he says, except he kind of does.

23. Chapter 23

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for mentions of the AIDS crisis, as well as ignorance about how the disease is spread, homophobia and fear of homophobic reprisal, and domestic violence- please tell me if I missed any.

Time for yet another Steve chapter and more Steve-Will bonding. Sorry I took so long replying to comments, I don't actually have an excuse this time, but I will do better next time. Thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and the kudos!

Together they get to work, Will no longer hesitating over everything. For a little while they work in silence, but then the boy starts chattering in the way Robin does, in the way *he'd* do if he wasn't so afraid the name *Billy* would slip out, about guys (or girls in Robin's case) he thinks are cute, and then about what it would be like to kiss a guy, whether it's any different to kissing a girl—

'It is and it isn't,' is his answer to that one. 'There's stubble, you know, and some girls wear lip gloss or lipstick— and that can taste *weird*— but otherwise some people are just better kissers than others, I think—'

'Wait— *you've actually kissed a boy?!*' Will blurts out, almost dropping the comics he's holding as he clumsily whirls around to face him, 'Who did you kiss?!'

'Uh—' he manages, 'I don't think he'd like me telling people—' and yeah, he told *Robin*. But she's his *best friend*, and kind of— *confidant?* — and Will is just a kid and might accidentally *tell someone*, and— Maybe it's just that it feels weird and kind of embarrassing to tell some kid that he kind of hopes might look up to him— just a little, he's not kidding himself there— that he spent, like, *way too many years* kissing Tommy H.

Will seems to consider this for a moment. 'But it wasn't Billy?'

‘No!’ he yelps. ‘Why would you think—? He would *not* want— Oh God.’

A shrug, ‘He is hanging around a lot these days, but maybe that’s just because of whatever’s going on with him and Max. You know, *sibling stuff*— Was it Jonathan?’

He blinks. ‘*Jonathan?*’ incredulous, ‘I’m pretty much sure that even back when he was beating my face in *Billy* liked me more than *he* does—’ and then he remembers that Will is Jonathan’s brother— ‘Um. Jonathan’s a good guy though—?’

Will frowns. ‘Jonathan likes you—’

He almost laughs but bites it back, instead giving an awkward little shrug. ‘Yeah, I guess—’

‘No, he *does*,’ Will insists, but then gets distracted by what he obviously really, really wants to know. ‘So it wasn’t Billy, and not *Jonathan*, so—’ the kid gets a funny look on his face, ‘No way. It wasn’t *Tommy H.*— was it?’

He feels himself flinch before he can stop himself. Fuck does he wish everyone could just forget the guy even *exists*. Every time he hears that name, or even some mention of him— It hurts. He hates that it still hurts. But then it’s only been— *not very long*, really, since that last, *stupid*, time when—

‘Holy shit it was!’ Will crows. ‘You kissed *Tommy H.*— wait— *doesn’t he have a girlfriend?*’

‘Carol,’ slips out.

‘So he’s pretending—’ Will muses, before ‘—or is he bisexual like you?’

He shrugs a little helplessly. He actually has no idea. He doesn’t even know if *Tommy* himself knows what he is.

‘Did Carol find out, is that why you’re all not friends anymore?’

Wouldn’t that make so much more sense than the truth— What

should he say? Should he say *anything*? Thinking about it is making a hot misery rise up in his chest— He shakes his head. ‘No she—’ fuck. All of a sudden he feels *defeated*. ‘She knew. She— It’s complicated kid. So complicated. And not just—’ not him and Tommy and Carol, but— ‘—*Life*. Life is complicated. Friends and lovers and— *complicated*.’

Will stares at him for a moment with large eyes, suddenly serious and sad again, and now he feels guilty— *again*. ‘So what happened? If Carol knows and that’s not—?’

He thinks back to what Will was saying earlier. ‘I think, as far as Tommy’s concerned— I think he *grew out of me*. Like you and your comics.’

‘Wait, so it was something *serious*?’ the kid blurts out. ‘It wasn’t just— like— *once*, or something?’

He shrugs, uncomfortable. ‘No, um, it was— *years*. Like, a few months after they got together, so we would have been about—’ he frowns. Holy hell were they *young*. ‘— maybe even younger than you, actually.’

The kid stares at him for a long moment, then, *carefully*, ‘So were you two—? *three*—? Um— When. *You know*— You and Nancy—?’

He quickly shakes his head. ‘No, he—’ Should he even be sharing this with the poor kid? It feels like he’s milking it for sympathy— and everything’s become about him again when it should be about Will. Wow is this stuff hard. Quickly, hoping Will won’t dwell on it too much, he says, ‘No. He told me to get a girlfriend, and I did, then he got all pissy about Nance and— Well, you know. Anyway, so—’

Before he can turn the conversation back to the kid Will is blurting out, ‘So, wait, if you were together that long did you do more than just *kiss*?’

No way is he answering *that* question, but apparently his expression has already given him away, because Will’s eyes get even *bigger*. ‘Oh wow, you *did*— Oh wow, with *Tommy H*—’ the kid trails off for a moment, before, ‘*Gross*. Oh that is *way worse* than my Mike thing.’

He's all— He is *horrible* Steve. You deserve someone so much better.'

'Yeah that is—' he sighs, 'that is not going to happen kid. Don't worry about it. My bullshit is just—' he winces, remembering Nancy's voice, '*bullshit*. Let's focus on you— There has to be, like, a *boy* somewhere in town that also likes boys, that's your age, not hideous, *nice*— that's the important part kid. It doesn't matter how amazingly hot he is, he has to treat you right— don't put up with it if he doesn't, just tell him to *fuck off*— or if not in Hawkins, somewhere nearby— or college, you're going to college right? Smart as you are—' Will is shaking his head. 'You're not going to college?' Why?

'No, not—' the kid sighs. 'If I can get a scholarship— I know mom started a college fund for both me and Jonathan when we were little, but she's never had much to put away and I think our dad might have — but that's not the point.' The kid takes a deep breath. 'I don't want to get AIDS, so, um, I don't think getting a boyfriend or whatever, or even, *you know*, with a guy, is a good idea.'

He blinks. He hasn't actually paid that much attention to the AIDS thing— he probably should have, but the most he's heard about it is from his dad when the man has been angry with someone about something and wishing they'd get it and die. 'You have to catch it somehow though, right? You don't just get it from having sex with another guy, they have to have it first. That's right, isn't it? So if you find a guy that *doesn't*— not that I think you should be having sex with someone. You're just a kid— and anyway, there has to be a test for it right? And they'll work out how to cure it— the best scientists, like, *disease* scientists have to be working on it. Right?'

Will shrugs. 'I don't actually— I know I should try to find out as much about it as I can, but it feels like if I do someone will find out and, you know, *guess*, or I'll find out something that'll make me—' the kid flinches, almost whispers, '—*hopeful*.'

'Oh—' what can he say to that? He should say something. The kid sounds so sad and lost and kind of *resigned*— Such a smart kid too. Thoughtful. All that time he was tugging on Tommy's dick he never stopped to consider if there were consequences— not that he thinks that— Well. If just touching a guy's dick will give you AIDS he'd be long dead. So— 'There's nothing wrong with having hope. Or having

a *boyfriend*— being alone is—’ ok, redundant, but, ‘*lonely*. So maybe we really should do some research into how to not get AIDS— for me, even if you decide you don’t want to, *you know*— because you never know when some stud—’ he almost starts laughing, but manages to hold it together, ‘—will fall for my many charms—’ he gestures up and down his body, lingering especially at his hair.

Wow is he a loser, but the kid looks a little bit less miserable and a bit more contemplative— in a good? way. He hopes— so maybe he’s helping.

Suddenly Will is shoulder bumping him again, except it turns into a kind of awkward side-hug, the boy pressing his face against his shoulder for a moment before breathing out, ‘Yeah. Ok—’ and then, ‘Thanks.’ He smooths a hand over the kid’s hair, holding it there for a second, before they separate and go back to packing.

It doesn’t take that long before they’re carrying boxes out to his car, loading the thing up until the both of them will barely fit in it. When they’re done they stop for a moment, eat the cookies, the two of them leaning against his beemer and looking back at the Byers house.

Half muffled with a mouth full of cookie Will says, ‘Is it bad that I’m glad we’re leaving? I mean, I grew up in this house—’ the kid sighs.

He thinks of what he knows, has been told, never sure he knows the full story, about Will being trapped in the Upside Down, desperate to communicate with his mom, making the lights flash— ‘No. I can understand kid. There’s parts of my own house— I mean. One day I’m going to move out, and when I do— I don’t think I’ll want to look back either.’

Will swallows the mouthful of cookie. ‘It’s not just—’ a deep breath, ‘—the *Upside Down* and everything that happened with it. It’s— Sometimes it’s like more unhappy things happened here than happy things. Especially before my dad left—’ the kid frowns.

He frowns. Everyone knows Lonnie Byers was a wifebeater— and *no one did anything about it*. He can remember his mom saying things like “well what did she expect? We all knew what he was— and good looks aren’t *everything*. She’s got no one but herself to blame—” it

makes shame rise in him, even though he'd never agreed— never argued though. Not that you really can argue with his mom.

After a moment Will says, 'Bob was a really good guy, you know? But so's Hopper—'

He nods. 'Yeah, he is.'

'And I'm pretty sure he *loves* her. Has loved her for, like, *forever*. Not that he'll admit it—'

He thinks for a moment. Nods again.

'—and the Christofferson house is— it's so *big*. You've seen it, right? And the yard— it's overgrown now, but— I think I can remember going there at Halloween when I was really little, and the front garden was— there were all these roses and flowers and things. Really nice. And—' Will sucks in a deep breath. Sighs. '—It's the kind of house mom always should have had, you know? And I think, maybe, we might have a chance at being happy there— but I don't know.'

'We better get going kid, unless you want me getting all soppy and emotional and telling you how you— all of you— more than deserve to be happy if anyone does,' he warns.

Will shoulder bumps him again.

'You want to stop off for a milkshake?' he offers as they climb into the car. It's stupid, isn't it? As if feeding the kid enough can wash away all the bad things in life.

Will glances at him then shrugs. 'Ok. But I think we should get it to go— mom's probably wondering where I am—' the kid hesitates, 'she still *worries*.'

'I think we all do,' he replies, and then, to smooth over the irritation he sees flashing across the kid's face— and he gets it. He's pretty sure Will resents the hell out of what happened making him even more *different* than he already was— he adds, 'Not just about you. About everyone. This town— I don't know about you, but I never feel safe here anymore.' He hadn't always felt safe in the past— but that

wasn't— that wasn't because of *monsters*. You know?

He lets Will talk him into getting a milkshake too— strawberry, yes *pink*, yes *girly*, yes pretty fucking *gay*. Sue him. He wants something *cheerful*. Anyway, plenty of guys who wouldn't suck a cock with a gun to their head like strawberry— why is he even worried about it? It's some kind of weird self-consciousness that must come from telling Will what he is.

When they're back in the car the kid stops sucking on his straw for a moment to give him yet another serious, *miserable* look. 'Don't you ever worry people will find out and, you know, try to *hurt* you?'

He doesn't know what to say to that, because in the past he *hasn't* worried. It was a thing between him and Tommy and Carol— not the rest of the town. Private. You know? *Behind closed doors*. And now— the Billy thing— He's been worried about *Billy*— and, yeah, kind of about his *dad*— but that's— that's not really a new worry either— the thought of, like, *the rest of the town* finding out—

'Shit,' he breathes out, but then shakes it off. He cannot freak out about it. If he freaks out about it Will might freak out, feel even less *safe*— 'If anyone *ever* gives you any kind of shit about it come to me and I will beat them up,' he promises.

'Yeah, but you're not very good at—' the kid trails off—

'I beat up that Russian,' he points out, trying to defend himself.

Will is giving him a funny look, but still says, 'Yes. Yes you did. Dustin told us—'

'What?' he asks, the funny look continuing and starting to unnerve him. If anything the kid is looking worried about *him*.

'Nothing,' Will says, shaking his head. Dismissive. 'Come on, let's get going so I can find somewhere in my new room to put all the boxes I'm not unpacking, before someone asks me *why*.'

'Just tell them you're tired and you'll do it later,' he suggests, starting the car.

‘Yeah, but they’ll all try to *help*—’ the kid sighs. ‘Even if I was just *tired*—’ another sigh, ‘I can, actually, do stuff for myself— *you know?*’

‘Yeah, I get it,’ he says, giving the boy an encouraging smile. ‘They act like that because they care about you, but it must drive you nuts sometimes.’

‘It *does*,’ Will says, nodding. ‘Mom and Jonathan are bad enough— but *Mike and Lucas*— one minute it’s like they’ve forgotten I exist because of El and Max, the next it’s like I’m a helpless little baby and I need them to wipe my ass for me—’

He winces, feeling sorry for the kid. Having a crush on Mike and the dark-haired boy alternately ignoring or patronising him must be— ‘If you ever need to get away from them you can always come around to my place—’ he offers, ‘Even when I get another job. I’ll get a key made for you— Though we should ask your mom first. We don’t need to give her a *reason* to worry—’ another thought crosses his mind, ‘— and you should probably stay away from the pool, yeah?’

A moment’s pause. He glances at Will, wondering if he’s somehow offended him or something, but the kid is giving him an entirely different look to before. A good kind of look. ‘Thanks Steve,’ is all he says though.

24. Chapter 24

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For internalised homophobia and the general content of this story so far, please let me know if I've missed any.

Wow has it been chaotic this week. Most of this chapter was finished days ago but I just haven't had time to complete it- not that it feels complete as is, but I'm posting it anyway out of a response to unscheduled chaos and the hope I'll get more time to write soon. Honestly I've only got a couple minutes now to post it now as is, so this is probably rushed and half coherent at best. Thank you all for reading, for the comments and kudos etc. Hope you're all safe and well all things considered. Take care of yourselves you wonderful people!

When they get to the Christofferson place— he supposes he should think of it as the *Byers* place— or maybe *Hopper-Byers* or *Byers-Hopper* or— Well. It'll sort itself out eventually— and get out of the car Mrs Byers comes over immediately to fuss at Will and smile at *him* and thank him for the food and tell him how delicious it all was.

He smiles back and thanks her as the other kids come crowding around Will to the sound of squawked complaints about why he's got a milkshake and they don't. To which the kid replies, smugly, *because I'm Steve's favourite now*. This leads to yet more squawking— maybe he shouldn't think of Dustin as *squawking*. It's pretty mean, the way Billy says it— but the kid kind of does, and now he can't forget that fact. Except all the other kids squawk too— he thinks maybe all kids squawk. Did he squawk when he was that age?

He ends up being “volunteered” to supervise the kids unpacking the boxes as Mrs Byers, Hopper, Nancy, and Jonathan head back to the old Byers house to refill the truck. It goes exactly how he'd expect, him standing around, hands on hips, telling them not to do things that they then proceed to do, which leads to them barely avoiding

breaking things that they then want him to swear not to tell Mrs Byers or Hopper about.

By the time the last truck-load arrives— a third trip being needed, even though the original plan had been only for two— everyone is tired and the kids have started arguing with each other about everything, so everyone ends up sitting on the dining room floor— “*look at it, an actual formal **dining room***”— Mrs Byers had exclaimed, “*what am I going to do with it? And they left this lovely old sideboard too — I never understood Paul Christofferson.*” eating pizza and drinking soda out of a collection of mismatching glasses, coffee mugs and the cups that go with his thermos.

Since Dustin tells him that the kid told his mother that he’ll be dropping him off home— which, *ok*— they head out after everyone’s finished eating— the kids all too pissy to want to spend any more time with each other than they have to. He says goodbye to Mrs Byers and Hopper and El and Max— and Will, even though the kid pretty much dogs his heels all the way out to the car— and he’s just unlocked the thing when—

It’s like his whole body sits up and takes notice like a dog that’s just spotted its master. It takes him a moment to realise that it’s the sound of the car— the Camaro— getting closer— and then he sees it and thinks *Billy* and thinks *fuck I’m an idiot and he’s come to get Max* and—

The car slows, suddenly, pulling up outside the house like it’s being driven by someone else. But it’s not. It’s—

Oh wow. He almost forgot how attractive the guy is.

He thinks their eyes meet, just for a moment, that shocking *blue*— but then he’s looking away, climbing into the car, flapping at Dustin to hurry up. He thinks he hears Will say, “Oh,” but he’s not sure and then Dustin is in the car and the doors are shut and when he looks up again Billy is strutting towards the door to the house, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, that kind of awkward-aggressive look about him that he gets when he’s dealing with men— *Hopper*. Of course— and he wants to get back out of the car and go and—

But then Dustin’s hurrying him up in between demands of “*when did*

Will become your favourite? I thought I was your favourite.”

He starts the car, glances at the boy sitting in the passenger seat, and then, airily, to be annoying, ‘I don’t have a favourite. I love all my children equally.’

He manages to hold it together through dropping Dustin off, through agreeing to pick the kid up and take him back to the new Hopper-Byers house tomorrow afternoon to see if anyone needs any more help, through being fussed at by Dustin’s mom— who thinks he’s such a *nice young man* and keeps trying to set him up with the daughters/nieces of her friends— some of which he’s already hooked up with at various parties or dated for a while, and some of which he wouldn’t touch if you were pointing a gun at him— he knows the drama that follows Staci Matherson around thanks, and he knows that Staci Matherson usually has no one to blame but herself for it— through the drive home and parking the beemer and going inside, but then—

—

At least Dustin didn’t mention Billy. The whole *is Billy a zombie?* thing seems to have deflated in the face of the guy not doing anything weirder than wearing too many clothes. Even the convoluted and stupid plans— like whatever that was with his pool originally, whining to Max about it so she’d invite Billy over so Dustin and Erica could see if any of him was turning green or dropping off when he took his shirt— that he *never* takes off anymore — off— seem to be stopping. The kids must be getting bored. Thank God.

He does not need them around him when he’s around a half-naked Billy— things could get *embarrassing*.

—

Hah!

Embarrassing—

For a moment he sinks into himself, hands going up to cover his face.

He feels hot, *too hot*, embarrassed and ashamed and worse than that kind of turned on— *just from a glimpse of the guy*. Like all these days without him have finally brought his body into a state where—

Since Nancy his libido has kind of, embarrassingly—

He can still get hard, obviously. Has still jerked off every now and then— but he's been—

Most of the time he's felt—

It's hard to describe it without using words like *unhappy* and *tired* and *not interested* and *kind of miserable* and *about as sexual as a mouldy kitchen sponge*. It's also kind of embarrassing that everything that went down with her— and, honestly, *Tommy and Carol*— has made him feel kind of—

Like. It's the kind of things *girls* are supposed to worry about, isn't it? If they're *desirable*.

He hasn't felt very desirable.

Apparently he needs to feel desirable, at least a *little*, to feel much in the way of this kind of out-of-nowhere *desire*. Most of the time anyway.

He doesn't feel any more desirable right now than he did a couple of weeks ago, but still his body is *burning*.

Hungry.

He *wants*— and holy hell does he not want to *want*. Not Billy. Not like this—

He's sure the guy will be able to see it on him. Will be *disgusted*—

—

If they ever even talk again. Which they might not— because Billy hadn't even waved or anything. Billy seems to be *avoiding him*, and it almost doesn't matter, because no matter what *Billy* thinks about the matter all of a sudden his mind is dwelling on Billy's lovely, perfect,

pretty dick again. The way it felt underneath his thigh.

How it would feel in his mouth.

He shudders, his own dick twitching, throbbing, *filling*. He's in the entrance hall and he's got a hardon and—

Wow is he ashamed of himself right now.

He creeps upstairs, kind of thinking of having a shower, washing the day's sweat off himself. He probably stinks.

—

Yeah.

Have a shower because he *stinks*, that's all—

God he's gross and weird and kind of *toxic*. He doesn't think he's ever lusted after someone who'd so utterly *not welcome* it before.

He tries to ignore his body. The way it *wants*. The way *he* wants. Tries not to think about Billy. Tries not to—

Tries.

Wouldn't it be nice, though, if things between them were like they used to be between him and Tommy and Carol? Billy could just reach out for him, grab at him, pull him close, *kiss* him, grind up against him— maybe even encourage him down to his *knees*.

—

Fuck.

No.

And then for a moment he's caught be how unfair it seems, that he never felt like he could reach out and *touch* Tommy, not *like that*— not kiss him, tug his dick, rub off against him, *anything* remotely sexual— that he always had to wait until the dark haired guy made the first move. It used to sit between them, heavy, making him *afraid*.

Afraid of what would happen if he just took what *he* wanted.

Fuck his life.

Maybe with Billy he'd be allowed to—

Ha.

That's hilarious Stevie. Touch Billy like that and he'd get his face broken again.

What he needs is to jerk off— while *not* thinking about Billy.

Or Nancy.

Though right now Nancy is the less appealing prospect—

Wow is he a— is it *masochist*? Sadists are the ones that hurt people, right? Instead he seems to like getting hurt— or maybe just catching feelings for the type of people who'll hurt him, one way or another. Whether they mean to or not.

25. Chapter 25

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for Billy's internalised homophobic freakout, possible suicidal ideation and talk of suicide, mentions of Neil.

Itty bitty chapter again. I got started with Steve's miserable jerkoff session but got a bit blocked, so instead we have part one of Billy losing his shit. I don't know. I wanted to get something posted at least. Stay safe out there, ok? You're all wonderful and thank you so much for reading and commenting etc.!

His head is just— *hollow*.

Echoing.

Static.

Panic.

—

Fuck.

—

How he doesn't just crawl out of his fucking skin, crawl out of Harrington's fucking car, completely lose his fucking *shit* on the way to the garage he has no fucking clue, but—

He doesn't really remember the journey. Or, you know, saying goodbye to Steve, or the brunet driving off, or paying the old man who runs the garage, or *anything* up to the point where he's standing in front of his baby, keys in hand, and Mr Duvall or whatever the fuck his name is suddenly says, 'I know something's wrong young man, I can see it in your face— my boy used to get a look like that sometimes—'

And he blinks. And for a split second he wonders how he got here, wonders where Ste— *No*. And then the old man is talking again and he really should try to pay attention. He looks sad, he thinks, Mr Duvall. ‘So maybe I should do for you what I failed to do for him—’ the guy takes a deep breath, ‘—That is to say— if you need to talk it through with someone then I’m willing to listen— and I won’t judge you, no matter what it is—’

He feels his eyes blink, disconnected from his sense of self. ‘I don’t think I can,’ slips out, honest. Honest like he does not want to fucking be right now.

The old man nods, taking out a crinkled pack of Camels and depositing one between chapped lips before offering the pack to him. Numb he takes one, lights it with his Zippo. ‘If that changes you can come back, you hear? Doesn’t matter if the car’s working fine—’

He nods, not really meaning it, not meaning anything. *Everything* is meaningless. He can taste the smoke in his mouth, it tastes *toxic*.

As he climbs in his baby it suddenly occurs to him to ask, not even sure why he does. ‘Where is your son?’

Mr Duvall shrugs, blowing out smoke between yellowed teeth and saying, ‘He got that look on his face one day and drove off— then he didn’t come back,’ the old man’s rheumy eyes go unfocussed. ‘Jim Hopper had to come and tell me when they found him— Poor man. So soon after— Anyway, he wrecked the car too. All that time we spent on it together—’ the eyes finally focus on him again. ‘Now. Don’t you go doing something silly, even if it seems like it’s the only thing you can be doing right now. That sister of yours looks at you like you hung the moon— and it wouldn’t be kind to poor Steve Harrington— He seems like a good friend to you and that boy’s got enough trouble in his life.’

‘Yeah,’ he breathes out with the smoke. ‘He’s a good guy—’

Sweet and fucking gorgeous and—

Static.

—

And the next thing he knows he's back home, the time between leaving the garage and arriving sucked into some void. He's panting. He's in his room. He's—

He thinks maybe there's tears trailing down his face but he's not sure. Might be sweat. Probably is sweat, because all around him is wreckage, all his *stuff* flung everywhere, clothes, skin mags, *weights*—

Oh fuck. The plaster's— What the fuck has he *done*? How the fuck has he—?

There's a fucking *hole* in the wall.

Not all the way through, just through the drywall, but—

It's big. Big and *jagged*, less like a punch and more like something's fucking *clawed it*— His right hand is covered in plaster dust to the wrist, particles of the stuff under his fucking *nails*—

Shaking he sinks to the floor, staring at what he's done.

'Jesus,' he breathes out. 'Jesus fucking *Christ*—'

—

After a while he staggers to his feet, staggers out of his room— *His car, he has to check on his*— He glances out the window. It looks fine. Parked really fucking *badly*. But—

Oh fuck.

Oh—

Fuck.

—

It's all *fucked*.

—

It takes most of the rest of the afternoon to clean up, to *fix* what he can— The hole in the wall staring him in the face the whole time. *What the fuck can he do about it?*

Fucking Neil is not going to be fucking *pleased*.

—

Hide it.

That's all he can do.

Hide it. Fix it when the old bastard and Susan go off on this year's vacation.

Yes. Yes. That's all he can do. That's all—

He ends up plastering every poster he has over it, wincing at the way you can almost tell there's something wrong behind them, the way they hang just a little— *off*. Then wincing when his eyes actually focus on their content. That's a lot of titties concentrated to one part of the room.

Jesus.

What will Steve thin— k—

Fuck. He almost punches his way through all his hard work, but somehow stops himself. Ok. *Ok. O-fucking-K—*

Shower, yeah? Shower and then. Then—

He passes his dresser, rearranging the bottles of cologne anxiously, trying to make it all like today never happened, fingers catching on the corner of the bottle of Aramis, where it's now *chipped* from being flung across the room. Fucking lucky neither broke. Would have made the room *stink*.

Would have been hard to hide.

He runs the water as cold as he can get it. Scrubs himself as *rough* as he can.

He gets out of the shower to a message from Max saying she wants to spend another night at the Hopper-Byers, so he rings back, makes sure everything's fine with everyone and then—

Then—

Fuck. Any second now he's going to start *screaming*. He's going to—

You know, the idea of taking the car out, *not coming back*, seems almost *tempting*.

Not necessarily *not coming back* the way Mr Duvall meant it, but he could pack all his shit into it now he's got his baby back, hit the road, go back to Cali— He's still got some savings. Max is safe. Disaster fucking *averted*—

—

But is she safe?

Is the fucking *gate* or whatever it is really gone?

Is the Mind Flayer?

Then there's fucking *Neil*—

Fuck his life.

Fuck his fucking life.

Fuck it *all*.

—

Once he's got his hair done he climbs into his car anyway, not heading out of town but to the liquor store usually manned by that blond jock that used to hang around Tommy H. The guy acts like he walks on fucking water, so no way is he ever carded.

He buys four six packs and a couple bottles of cheap bourbon, drives out into the forest, drives out to where he drove out to that night, after he got loose from that fucking monster, and then, well—

—

Static.

—

26. Chapter 26

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For Billy's continued internalised homophobic freak out, discussions of suicide, a bit of body horror, let me know if I missed any.

May you live in interesting times, huh? I hope, so much, you're all safe and well and the impact of the current situation isn't hitting you too hard- I don't know what else to say about it. Take care of yourselves, ok?

Anyway, we're still with Billy this time- Steve's sad wank hasn't managed to come together yet- I hope you enjoy. Thank you all for reading!

A light little weight on his chest and the feel of something pecking at him is the first thing he's aware of, opening his eyes to see a bird— fuck knows what kind of bird— he is *not* a fucking bird expert— it's *brownish*, as if that helps— on him, hopping around, exploring him like he's got bugs for it to eat in all his clothes.

What?

He blinks, turns his attention from his torso to— *the sky*? What? The sky and trees and a fucking little bird that flaps off in a panic as he sits up. *Shit.*

Shit.

At least he's not naked— he looks down to check. Yeah. Still fully clothed. Just fully clothed in the middle of the fucking *forest*—

Where is his car?

Fuck his fucking car, where is *he*?

He gets up, waiting for the hangover to hit— then almost staggering

when it *doesn't*, when he continues to just feel fucking *fine*. Great. As healthy hale and whole as he's ever felt. *Jesus*.

The first thing he does is have an amazingly long piss against a tree. The second thing is take a few confused, disorientated steps and almost trip his way into Steve's back yard, freezing in place, staring at the blue water of the pool in the early morning light.

Ok. *Ok*. He is not going to think about this right now.

Turning his ass around he heads back into the forest, soon picking up an absolute mess of a trail that he thinks must have been him—though it looks less like it was made by a *him* shaped him, and more like it was made by a *bull*— Or a fucking *spider monster*—

Not thinking about that either.

After about half an hour— maybe forty minutes— walk he finds his baby, sitting where he left it, driver's door open and a staggering number of empty cans spilling out of it. *Well shit*.

He can just imagine showing up back home with all this, *Neil's* fucking reaction. It's probably undo his victory, leave the old bastard feeling like the winner, because there's getting a bit sloshed on a regular basis like his fucking dad does, and then there's going out and drinking enough to legitimately *kill a person*, like it seems he's done.

Hah. *Person*.

Wow, ok, he is *not crying*.

He thinks maybe two of those six packs and at least one of the bottles of bourbon were meant for *later*, when the urge struck again— like he knows it's going to— not that he'd really been thinking at the time— but—

He lifts one, then the second, empty bourbon bottle out of the footwell—

Oh, he must *stink* of it.

Fuck.

It's not, well, something to be *proud of*, but he finds a soft spot in the dirt under the leaf litter and digs a shallow hole, burying the evidence of his night where he hopes he'll never have to see it again. See. There. *Gone*.

It's like it never even happened in the first place.

His dad won't find out.

—

More importantly *Max* won't find out and be disappointed in him.

He drives back into town carefully, expecting to still be drunk— even though as far as he can tell he's as sober as a fresh, young judge not disillusioned with their profession yet.

Fucking Neil and Susan are already off at work when he gets home, thank fuck, giving him peace to drink terrible coffee and kind of—

Sulk.

Yeah, ok. He needs to— to—

Anything. He needs to do anything—

Anything but think.

He kind of wishes the pool had rung so he could go into work, but since it *hasn't*—

—

He goes for a run, a long run, because he's been lazy recently, and last night sure as hell wasn't a *healthy* thing to be doing, and by now he should be getting out of shape— except he's *not*. He's running far too fucking *fast*. Legs eating up the ground, doing his ten miles in less than two thirds the time.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck—

Ok. Ok. Not thinking about *that* either.

The worst thing is he's not even *kind of* tired at the end of it.

Still not thinking about that.

So, since he's got nothing else to do, and since he's now started up his life-before-all-this-stupid-shit exercise routine he might as well continue it, he spends the next while at his weights, cringing a little inside as he has to add more, and then more again, lifting way more than should be possible even if he hadn't slacked off since the Upside Down decided to intrude into his life.

At the end of it—

At the end of it—

Is this even his body anymore?

Fuck.

At the end of it he's absolutely fucking *ravenous*, but that makes sense, doesn't it, the last time he ate was—

Steve sitting across from him at the diner, hair brushing his shoulders, smiling at him— pretty smile too.

Fuck.

Ok. Ok. O—

He scrubs himself raw in the shower, washing away sweat and the lingering stink of booze that has to be on him, not even touching the *hot* tap. Not touching anything else he shouldn't be either. Still not *thinking*. And then—

Yeah, he shouldn't, but he doesn't have it in him right now to cook something, eat something, all alone in this house he *hates*. So he goes back to the diner. Goes back and sits in the same booth as last time—

Steak, lots of it, and more coffee, and—

It's not the same. Not without Max. Or St—

Yeah. But the coffee's good and the meat comes out thick, juicy and still a bit bloody in the middle— even if it's a cheap cut, a bit tough — Doesn't matter, his teeth make short work of it—

The hard thing is the silence. The lack of company. The lack of *diversions*— Leaves him in danger of thinking too much. Noticing things he does not want to notice.

That does not mean he wants the *Chief of fucking Police* sitting his massive Goddamn ass down opposite him just after he's put in an order for a fourth steak. 'What?' he snaps, and then tries to temper it with a 'Sir.'

The guy smirks at him, 'Can't a man sit down to lunch with his kid's best friend's older brother?'

He almost says *No* but stops himself. Shrugging. Watching the man warily as Chief Hopper orders a burger, fries and a massive coffee.

His own steak arrives at the table at the same time as the man's burger, and he watches the Chief flirt— *but not really, more like a game than anything serious*— with the waitress— a woman at least twenty years the man's senior, who smiles and slaps the cop gently on the shoulder, like this is an old joke between them— as she puts the food down and carries off his old, empty plates. When she's gone he finds himself asking, 'Did you want something?'

The Chief's eyes focus on him— 'I met Tomas Duvall last night at the Big Buy.'

'Yeah, *and*—?' he demands, feeling himself get even *tenser*. Which should not be possible. Maybe he was right about that old man first time they met.

The cop's face scrunches up, awkward for a moment— a fucking *long* moment— and then, 'Look— *Ah fuck, how am I supposed to do this?*—' and then, before he can suggest that maybe the guy just *not* do whatever *this* is— 'Is everything alright?— Yeah, I know, you're a *man*. I'm a man. We're all— *men*,' the cop sighs. 'And yeah, *feelings*— I get it. I do. I get it— but then I've got Joyce in my ear about— *you know*—' no he does not *know*— 'So I guess the sky isn't going to fall if

I— *yeah*,' and then, after that rambling bunch of bullshit, 'Are you ok?'

'Why are you asking?' he grits out. He's fucking *fine*. And even if he *wasn't*, in no universe does— and that thought could end so many ways. In no universe does some *pig* care if he's ok. In no universe does a man ask another man, *in public*, if he's ok. In no universe does he want to talk about this. In no universe—

Another pause and then the man says, 'Tomas said you looked like a man about to do something *stupid*.' —He snorts out a breath. Great. Just— *great*. Fucking old man telling tales on him— 'He was worried,' the cop adds, eyes *knowing*. 'He wasn't trying to start something— He said he told you a bit about his son?'

He nods, finally picking up knife and fork and carving a lump of flesh off his steak, feeling the muscle fibres give way between his teeth when he shoves it in his mouth. He chews. Angry. *Frustrated*— Where's St— Where's *someone* when he needs him, someone to smooth this all over and get him out of this conversation—

The Chief follows his lead, taking a big bite out of his burger before speaking again. 'Yeah, well Jared Duvall was always doing something *stupid*, so if anyone can recognise it in a man it's Tomas—'

'He kill himself?' he interrupts to ask. That's what it sounded like.

The cop thinks for a moment. 'Tomas thinks so. Some of the town thinks it was just an accident—'

'What do *you* think?' he asks, pointing at the Chief with a piece of bloody meat.

'I don't know he set out intending for it to happen—' Chief Hopper says after a moment's thought, 'But I don't think it was all that unwelcome when it did. He was— *unhappy*—' and the way that's said is *loaded*, but he doesn't know enough to decipher what's hidden in the word, '— No. Not just *unhappy*, but *trapped* by it— and I get it. I do. I've had nights—' the man breaks off, blowing out a breath and going to rub his hands over his face, before frowning at them when he realises they're covered in ketchup. That gaze transfers back to his

face, a kind of wary, *constipated* look on the man's face. 'Look. What I'm trying to say is— *yeah*. Life sucks sometimes. But if anything happens to you then it'll make Max unhappy, which'll make *El* unhappy— which'll make *me* unhappy, which'll then make Joyce unhappy, which'll make Jonathan and Will unhappy, Jonathan being unhappy will make Nancy unhappy, and Will— if the rest of the kids weren't already unhappy because Max and El were unhappy then *Will* being unhappy would do it for them. So, yeah— Oh, and *Steve* would be unhappy too, of course— don't know why, but that kid has decided you're one of his closest friends now— and *Steve* being unhappy would mean that *Robin* girl was also unhappy and— What I'm trying to say is don't do anything *stupid*, because it'll upset pretty much everyone that even kind of matters to me, and— *Oh my God I am bad at this*. I don't know what to say— you *get* what I'm saying, right? You're *important* to people. Part of our, I don't know, *community* now— Fuck. Just pretend I said the right thing, ok?'

Steve would be—

'I'm not going to do anything stupid,' he snaps, ignoring the whole— four six packs of beer and two bottles of bourbon thing. That's only *stupid* if you're not—

A monster.

— and he is. *Whatever he is*. So, in his case, *not* stupid.

'Good—' the man clears his throat, then sighs. 'Good talk— I guess— God. Honestly, I don't know what I'm doing, kid—'

'I'm *not a—*' he's hissed before the man interrupts him, looking like he wants to be here, giving this talk about as much as *he* want to be on the receiving end of it.

'*Yeah*, I know. Look at you. The picture of *grew up too soon*— but it slipped out, ok? Wasn't meant as a— a— *aspersion* on your masculinity.'

He can't keep the glare off his face, or the expression that's probably *screaming* how little he trusts the man. Fuck. He needs to pull himself together—

In more ways than one.

‘Let’s just agree to pretend this didn’t happen,’ the man says after a long moment’s deep contemplation of his wilting fries. ‘I mean, not— You *still* agree not to do anything stupid, but we both forget my fumbling attempts to, you know, *talk to you* about it.’

‘Whatever,’ he snaps, spearing the last bit of his steak— admittedly a pretty *large* chunk of steak, usually two mouthfuls, but he wants to get the fuck out of here and it does fit in his mouth—

The cop looks a bit grossed out, before shrugging and finishing off the burger with bites almost as big as his, so it’s not like the man has room to complain. ‘Well, *nice* as this was—’ he gets to his feet, fishing some money out of his pocket and tossing it on the table. Time to get the fuck out of here.

The cop’s eyes go from the money to his face, before the man scoops it up and holds it back out to him with a shrug, ‘My treat.’

‘You got no idea how much steak I just ate,’ he points out, refusing to take the cash. ‘Whatever this is, I don’t think it extends to paying *that much*— also, I don’t need your *pity*—’ and then it’s like he remembers who he’s talking to, just how *miserable* this man could make his life here in Hawkins, so he hastily pastes on another, ‘*Sir*.’

‘It’s not *pity*,’ Chief Hopper says, rolling his eyes. ‘Just take the money — you can use it to pay for lunch next time you’re out with the kids and they decide they each need enough waffles to feed the entire basketball team.’

It almost makes him smile. *Greedy little shits*— ‘Ok, fine,’ he snatches the cash back, and at least part of why he does it is that he doesn’t know what’s more dangerous. Doing what this man wants or continuing to disobey.

On his way back home he tries not to think about what the hell the cop was thinking, trying to talk to him about— *What did Chief Hopper think, Mr Duvall think?* Was he really coming off as a guy who was in danger of—

Yeah. *Not thinking about it.*

Not thinking about *anything*.

27. Chapter 27

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For Billy's continued freakout, for oblique references to fear of homophobic reprisals and blackmail. Tell me if I missed any.

I have no idea what to say. The world is- this is just unprecedented in my lifetime. I have no idea how I got this done. Way too much of my time seems to be spent glued to the news. Anyway, here is a chapter, for better or worse. Sorry, also for the laggier than the usual lag in responses to your comments. It's just- Well. This is our world right now. I'll try to do better next time. Stay safe everyone! <3

—

There's gotta be a party on tonight, right? What he needs is to go out, find a girl, do the full fuck— Because he still can. Ok? Ok. He still — Girls are so fucking hot, yeah? So fucking—

Max is weird when he rings round the Byers place and asks if she wants to spend another night there if it's ok with Mrs Byers and Chief Hopper— no way does he want her home without him, not if there's even the slightest chance Neil might be *Neil* about things after, you know, he *won*— She seems worried about him, all *OhmyGodBilly, are you ok? Neil didn't— did he?* And when he asks *why*, she's all *You sound weird, like, really weird.*

He tells her he's tired, *not sleeping*, which gets him a noise of understanding, then tells her he wants to go out, have a bit of fun, but doesn't want her *alone*. All true enough.

He maybe loses a bit of the afternoon, after she tells him it's ok with Mrs Byers, and then adds, '*Be careful, ok Billy? Don't do anything— just be careful.*' before she hangs up. *Why does everyone think he's gonna—*

He's alone then. Alone with nothing to do but watch shitty TV he can't stand, or get drunk, or—

—

Susan coming home snaps him out of whatever it was, blinking himself back into awareness to realise he's sitting on the edge of his bed, head in his hands. He gets up, gets ready to go out on autopilot, shoving condoms in his back pocket, cringing at the scent of Aramis on his skin once he's applied it— reminds him of—

—teve's fancy ass French cologne blending with his own, the smell of cigarettes, brown hair down, brushing a long neck—

'See ya, Susan,' is about all he manages on his way out the door, ignoring her calling after him, asking where he's going— though calling back that Max's staying at the Chief of Police's when she follows him out to the car to ask. Then he's off, fishing a pack of Marlboros out of the glovebox— glaring into it when he realises there's only one left.

Time to go see Candy— Hah. *Does 7-11 stock Gauloises?* He misses the rougher edge to the smoke, the way it reminds him of—

Just. Yeah. The rougher edge to the smoke.

Maybe they'll have some unfiltered Camels—

She glances up from whatever book she's reading when he waltzes in, rolling her eyes when she sees it's him. 'Hey Candy cane!' he calls out, coming over to drape himself over the counter. Grey eyes flick to his face and then away, *dismissive*. 'They stock Gauloises in this fine establishment?'

A little wrinkle forms between her brows. 'I thought you were a Marlboro man?'

'Yeah, well—' he shrugs.

She sighs, annoyed, and puts the book down to check behind her— 'You after one packet or—?'

'I am after as many packets as you've got,' he replies, gaze going to the book. It looks very— he flips it over, reads a couple of lines— eyebrows climbing at the amazingly fucking *graphic* description of some chic's naked body— things heaving and dripping and more than ready for a bit of action. 'You reading porn at work, Candy cane?'

She whirls around, flinging two cartons of Gauloises down onto the counter before snatching the book out of his hands and to her chest, almost hiding it from sight, her eyes wide, staring at him in alarm.

He stares back.

They're still staring as some yuppie prick comes in to pay for some gas and get himself a cup of shitty coffee and a burrito that looks like it's been out all day— Guy wants food poisoning then it's none of his business.

Candy serves the man, moving all jerky, like she's suddenly been replaced by a robot— turning her attention back to him the moment the yuppie leaves. She looks— Actually, she looks *pissed*, and more than a little like she's waiting for him to do something horrible to her.

'What?' he asks. 'You wanna read porn then read porn. *What do I care?* I'm not the kinda guy that thinks there's something wrong with a girl for having a sex drive.'

'How much did you read?' she demands, her fingers tightening on the book's cover.

'Not much,' he shrugs, 'Just something about some girl's tits and then a description of what her pussy looks like— Why? What I read seemed dirty enough— you gonna tell me it gets *filthier?*' The girl cringes, drawing herself up, trying to seem composed. It's like she's got something to hide— 'It's not kiddie porn or animals or something, is it?'

'It's not fucking *kiddie porn!*' she snaps, lurching like she's going to throw the book at him, before carefully hiding it behind her back. 'There's your Goddamn cigarettes, so pay and *leave.*'

‘Real convincing,’ he says with a laugh, before fishing out the cash and handing it over. ‘Here.’

She snatches it from him, counting out his change faster than he has ever seen anyone count cash, and handing it over while doing her best not to touch him— and yeah, it’s all been kind of funny. You know, she’s usually so composed, so in charge— and the whole interaction has taken his mind off— *things he’s not thinking about*— but he does feel kind of bad. Whatever smut she’s reading she’s obviously sensitive about it, so, gentler than before, ‘Look, I really don’t care what you get off to— and I’m not going to *tell* anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about. So chill, ok?’

She stares at him for a moment more, before blowing out a deep breath. ‘Whatever. Just— *don’t*. Ok? Whatever you think you’ve got on me— I *don’t care*. So—’

‘You think I’m gonna— *what?* Try and blackmail you because you were reading something to get your panties wet instead of working?’ he scoffs, and then realises she’s *serious*. ‘This fucking town is *insane*. Jesus.’ He snatches up the cartons from the counter, ‘I’ll get out of your hair, ok? You don’t need to worry about me coming back and making you freak out for no fucking reason.’

A pause, and then, ‘You really won’t—’ she trails off, rubbing a hand roughly over her face and smudging her eyeliner. ‘I don’t know if I’m scared you’re going to tell someone or that you’ll think you can make me— *I don’t know*. I don’t know why I’m— You really didn’t read any more than that? You’re really not going to make trouble for me because of it?’

‘The girl in that book got state secrets up her pussy or something?’ he asks, utterly confused. ‘Russian codes? The fucking *Gate*?’

‘What?’ she frowns, face scrunching up cutely. ‘What *gate*?’ She really is hot— but she’s also not— Whatever it is she’s not. *His type*? He wouldn’t have said he had a type before, but maybe he does. Anyway, hot or not, he doesn’t do it for her and that’s just as important as whether she does it for him— he’s never really been one of those guys who likes a chase. Too much effort. Better if she wants it as much as he does. *Easy*. Fun. Chase a girl who isn’t interested at

first and she might end up thinking it's all more than it is—

Fuck, he needs to get laid.

'Don't worry about it,' he waves off her question. 'I swear— I fucking *pinkie swear*—' he extends his right hand towards her, the finger in question sticking up, '—that I am not going to do whatever it is you think I'm going to do just because I caught you reading porn. Ok?'

She studies his face for a moment, before hooking her own pinkie around his and the two of them shaking on it. 'Ok. I am *trusting* you —'

'Trust away,' he says, taking his hand back. 'I am very fucking *trustworthy*.' God, this whole encounter has been so fucking *weird*— He turns to go, 'See ya, Candy cane,' and as he does it's like reality sinks in— The reality *he is not thinking about*—

Shit.

He turns back, 'You know of any parties on tonight?'

She blinks at him. 'I think Brad's having another one— I know Tommy H is, but I think I'd go to Brad's if I had to go to either.'

He snorts out a laugh, sounding almost as crazy as the black-haired guy did the night he tried to beat his face in. 'Somehow I don't think I'd be welcome at that freckly fuck's house even if the sight of him didn't make we want to commit homicide—' he hesitates, 'By Brad you mean *Dailey*? Big fucker, face like a potato?'

She laughs before she can stop herself. 'I should tell him you said that —'

'You friends or dating or something?' he asks, curious. He's pretty sure he's never seen her at, like, *any* party he's been at.

Her face scrunches up in mild disgust. 'Ew. No. He's my cousin's best friend. I've known him since *forever*.'

It's something—*better*— leaving things like that. Like he doesn't have to feel guilty about something he can't even *begin* to understand.

Seriously. *Fucking weird* interaction.

28. Chapter 28

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For Billy's continued internalised homophobic freakout, mentions of Neil, mentions of guys doing non consensual things to girls, panic attacks, possibly more please let me know if I missed any.

Also there's some pretty graphic hetero sex here guys, just letting you know.

I could have kept going, but decided to break the chapter here in case you want to want to skip over the hetero sex. I hope so much that everyone is well and safe and- yeah. Thank you all, as always, for reading! Take care out there!

Back in his car, back on the road, Gauloise between his lips, heading to Brad Dailey's for hopefully a better night than he had the last time he was there— everything starts creeping in on him. His foot seems to get heavier. The hand on the speedometer winding upward, upwards, *upwards*—

There's already cars on the street, but he finds a place and pulls in with a squeal of rubber on tarmac. He stalks into the party like he owns the place, body flowing along to the heavy synth beat of some song he's never heard before. He's all easy smiles, eyes on the girls, looking for one that *looks* back—

He's no more here to dance and drink than he was last time, only unlike last time he has no intention of leaving *unsatisfied*. A brunette, he compromises with himself, not thinking about *why*. Leggy, Big eyes. Nice hair— *small tits*, maybe. *Tall* would also be good.

A girl.

Yeah. He wants a *girl*.

In between his entrance and finding the girl he drinks a bit— maybe a bit too much if he was— but he's not. So, even if he should be a bit wobbly on his feet by the time he spots *her* all he actually is is a little more *relaxed*.

She smirks as he comes over, tilting her head up and shifting to show off her long limbs and gentle curves with the kind of confidence that Chelsea always seems to be trying to imitate.

Pretty girl, *hot*, but more than hot— that is the look of a girl who knows what she *wants*. Also, he thinks maybe they had some classes together.

Amy, it turns out her name is. She's a good dancer too. *Sinuous* or something, her hips swaying side to side in a way that's—

Thank fuck, his dick's actually getting hard.

He grunts as she reaches down there, between them, cupping him in her palm and giving a gentle squeeze, *purring* at the resultant little helpless thrusts of his hips. 'You a good *fuck*, Billy boy?' she coos into his ear. 'You worth taking for a ride?'

It should be— *weird* or something. Kind of awkward. But the way she says it, the way she's *touching* him— Yeah. He's pretty sure she knows her way around a dick—

His *favourite* kind of girl.

'Why don't you find out,' he purrs back, groping at her ass, pulling her short shorts upwards until the seam has to be grinding against her pussy.

She smirks at him— almost eye to eye, probably only an inch shorter than he is— and grabs him by the front of his silk shirt, leading him through the dancers, the drinkers, the young and dumb and drunk, and back upstairs. Back to the same room as last time.

She's a better— *everything*—than the awkwardness of Chelsea. Pushing him back against the bedroom door and devouring his mouth — a good kisser, he thinks from somewhere far away— She's all legs and small tits like he wanted, the curve of her waist shallow, her

figure *gamine*.

There's no little girl's tomboy fantasy in the way she kisses though, or the way she grabs at him, leaves his shirt alone when he insists but *strips* off his jeans, *handles* him, shoving him back towards the bed. 'I'm on top,' she says. Climbing onto the bed to straddle him.

Um— 'No,' he replies, shifting out of the way before she can settle into his lap.

'Why?' she pouts, *mocking*, 'You one of those guys that can only feel like a *big bad man* when he's holding a woman down?'

'Fuck *no*,' he snaps. 'It's—' How to explain that he *loves* being ridden, but only when he knows the girl, knows the surroundings, and knows they're not about to be burst in on by some pissed dad/brother/uncle/cousin/*boyfriend* and he's not going to have to try and fight the bastard off while trying to get her off his lap and also try and prevent her taking any of the hits. 'I don't know you well enough.'

'You don't *know me*—' she laughs, a little husky, and he's just thinking *fuck this*, when she shrugs and says, 'Well I'm not doing doggy style. I don't like it up the ass and too many guys seem to think I won't notice if I'm face down when they go *oops, wrong hole*.'

'I'm not trying to fuck you up the ass,' he snaps. Jesus, Brad Dailey's house is fucking *cursed* when he wants to get his dick wet. 'What about missionary?' he suggests after a moment's thought.

Her face wrinkles up as she considers it. 'I guess— but you're going to have to eat me out first. It's harder for me to come if I'm not on top.'

'Fine with me,' he says, grabbing for her, hands on narrow hips as he helps her lie down with her legs spread. Unlike Chelsea she turned on the light when they entered the room—and thank fuck she let him keep his shirt when he stopped her taking it off him, even if it did make her laugh at him— meaning he can see her. See her properly— For a moment he's afraid he'll be turned off, *disgusted* by her pussy—that he's been lying to himself all these years— but he's not. His dick throbs as he looks at her, ducking down eagerly to bury his face in it.

Fuck is she *bossy*. The moment he gets to work she's got her hands in his hair, guiding his mouth, grinding her hips up to meet him. It's— Yeah. Brad Dailey's house is fucking *cursed*.

It's not— He doesn't like being grabbed. *Trapped*. And he could think about why that is, but he doesn't want to be thinking about his dad's unpredictability and growing up never feeling *safe* when he's trying to eat out a girl.

He needs to do this. He *needs* to do this— so he does his best to breathe deep through his nose and relax into it, and, once the first kind of panic's faded, it's not that bad. Not as bad as *Chelsea* anyway — maybe because for all her tugging on him she's also cooing out a constant ramble of praise— especially once he's got a couple fingers involved— and a man likes to feel his hard work is being appreciated.

When she comes it's with a full body contraction, bear-trapping around his head, clinging to him with hands and arms and legs as she twitches and spasms. When it's over and he's pulled back she smirks up at him, looking hazy and *satisfied*, 'You're good at that. Almost makes up for it if you turn out to be a terrible fuck—'

He snorts out a laugh, feeling odd and dark and kind of *bitter*. 'I've never had any complaints—'

'Well get over here so I can judge for myself,' she purrs, eyes on his dick.

She keeps her eyes on him as he grabs his jeans, fetches a rubber, and rolls it down his dick— *why does this all feel so wrong?* It's not that she's not hot. It's not that he doesn't *want* her. Doesn't want to *fuck* her— but—

He climbs onto the bed, moves in between her legs— that come up immediately and curl around him. He lines himself up, glancing briefly into her *too green* eyes, then pushes in. It's physical then. Nothing more than the feel of her, the way she's tight and wet, the way she cries out, the smell of her perfume and sweat in his nose.

Grinding, grinding, grinding— and it's *mindless*. Or at least he *wishes*

it was mindless. But there's part of him that can't help but think she feels *wrong* in his arms. The smooth skin of her throat, the soft swell of her tits, the narrowness of her shoulders, the pitch of her moans—

He gets a hand under her hips, lifts and tilts, until his thrusts her getting her *just right*. Her body *shaking shaking shaking*. The she's scrabbling a hand down between them, rubbing at that spot above the hole of her pussy, and he's saying something like, '*let me,*' but she's snapping '*don't you fucking dare stop what you're doing,*' and she bear-traps up around him again, almost whining as she comes a second time, his lap suddenly *wet* and the way she tightens up around him drags him over the edge too—

At the end, as he falls, an image flashes across his mind. *Steve under him, hair down, mouth open, panting, surging up against him, the scent of their colognes mixing—*

With his face still pressed to her throat he reaches down mechanically and closes his hand over the top of the condom, preventing anything from spilling as he pulls out, strips it off and flings it somewhere off the bed for someone else to deal with. It's funny— it's—

His breath keeps catching in his throat.

He feels *too hot*.

He—

He can't breathe—

He—

Is he dying?

Things get a bit confusing after that. He can feel her pushing at him so he does his shaky best to climb off her— but that's about as much as he can manage, lying on the bed like a landed fish, thinking *fuck, this is not how I thought I'd die—*

She says something, but he can't drag his mind together enough to understand more than her swearing and something about her dad and

then the words, 'I'm going to go get Brad.'

*Fuck his life, he wants to fuck **Steve**.*

Oh God. Oh fucking God.

Is he a *faggot* or what?

29. Chapter 29

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for internalised homophobia, mentions of Neil, mentions of drink driving, mentions of suicide, please let me know if I missed any.

Wow, I'm actually being productive recently, I got this done, it's a little longer than some of my recent chapters, and I wrote an entire stupid Star Wars fic. Anyway, here you go, another Billy chapter- I think next time we might switch back to Steve, if I can just manage to finish the one where he jerks off sadly. I hope you all are well and safe(don't worry about me. Unless things change things are going surprisingly well here), and thank you, so much, for reading my ramblings and letting me know if you like them!

By the time the door swings open again he's managed to get himself seated resting against the head of the bed. He's still breathing. He's not *dead*. He's— '—freaking out like my dad does, but it's not like he's been to Vietnam so I've got no idea what's going on,' he hears the girl— *Amy*. *Her name is Amy*— saying from the hall as Brad Dailey and Adam from the pool pile into the room.

From somewhere far away he registers Brad yelping, '*Jesus*, Hargrove dick,' but then Adam's sitting on the edge of the bed and he briefly considers hitting the guy but since he's holding out a mostly full bottle of Jack Daniels that might have to wait.

He grabs the bottle, swallowing, swallowing, swallowing— 'Wow, should you let him drink that much?'— Brad, again. He sticks his middle finger up at the guy, transferring the gesture to Adam when the dark-haired guy tries to take the bottle back. When the bottle's empty he lets it drop to the coverlet, trying to ignore the way Brad is saying, 'Ok, you're going to get alcohol poisoning or something and die in my spare room. My parents are going to be so pissed— *Jesus* Adam—'

'I didn't know he was going to drink the whole thing,' his co-worker is bitching back.

'I'll be fine,' he snaps. *Oh*, he can breathe again. He sits forward, reaching for his jeans caught on the end of the bed.

'I'm not sure about that,' Adam says, looking constipated or worried or something. 'Why the hell did you drink the whole bottle? Jesus. I thought maybe a drink would help but not—'

He snorts out a laugh, darkly amused. 'It'd take way more than *that* to kill me.' *Fuck*. He must have been panicking or some shit— *what is he, a pussy?* He glances from the jeans to them, 'Can you fucks get out of here, or do you want me to flash my dick at you?'

'Already seen it,' Adam says, getting up off the bed. 'It's nothing special— We'll be back in a minute, because the moment you pass out I'm rolling you on your side— Dan almost choked on his own vomit at Tommy H's one night and it was kind of— *fucked up*.'

Who the fuck's Dan? Fuck it. He does not remotely care. 'You'll be waiting all night if you expect me to pass out after only drinking that much.' At that he gets off the bed— if they're lingering it's not his fault if they see his dick—

He hesitates. *He's not trying to deliberately show it to them, is he?*

Warily he glances at Adam, at Brad, waiting to feel *something*— Mainly he feels *annoyed*. Ok. Ok. All good—

He steps into the jeans, pulling them up over his legs, and doing up the fly while he looks around for his boots. *Ah*, over by the door—

'Look man,' he tells Brad as he grabs the shoes, 'I hate to be a downer, but your parties are kind of always a shitty time, so I think I'll get out of here—'

Brad grabs him. He swings before he thinks about it, the guy dodging back out of his reach, hands up, 'Shit! Ok. Ok— calm down yeah! I'm not tryna— *You're not driving*, ok? Ok. Like— I'm not the kind of pussy who thinks a guy shouldn't get behind the wheel just because he's had a few, but that was, like, *a whole bottle of Jack*. You are

going to *blackout*, man, and you don't wanna blackout driving—'

He just *stares* at the guy, this *potato* of a jock, all worried he's going to what? Crash his car or some shit. This is not— This is not *appropriate* jock behaviour. Guy should be— and *Adam* too— they should both be laughing and trying to get him to drink more, not— 'Why the *fuck* are you acting like someone's *mom*?' not necessarily *his*, as he has no idea how she'd act in this situation, but, like, a *TV* mom.

'*Dude*,' Brad whines. 'Not cool— We're just, like, *doing the right thing*. Don't be an ass about it.'

It makes him laugh— admittedly kind of hysterically, but *laugh*. Sitting heavily on the edge of the bed and just cackling, boots hanging limply from his grip.

'*What?*' Brad is demanding, looking very sulky for a guy that's probably six and a half feet tall.

Eventually he manages, 'This town is the most confusing fucking— I don't even know. All that fucked up shit and everything and now *responsible* jocks. *Jesus*. Fuck my life—'

'Well, he's having a nervous breakdown,' Adam mutters loud enough to make it obvious he meant everyone to hear.

'Fuck off Adam,' he says, sticking his finger up at the guy again.

'Oh, you remember my name,' the dark-haired guy says, sarcastic. 'Now I'm feeling really *special*.'

'Guess you're annoying enough to make an impression—'

Which is when the door swings back open and Amy sticks her head into the room. 'He ok now?' she asks, talking about him but not to him.

'I'm fucking *peachy*,' he snaps. *Fucking hell*— this is actually getting kind of embarrassing. 'And leaving, I'm—'

'Yeah, I don't think so,' Adam says, moving vaguely in front of the

door. 'Look, I know you probably don't even, like, *remotely care*, but if you leave now and do end up wrapping yourself around a tree or something then I'm going to feel pretty shitty— Brad too, right?' grey eyes go to the taller guy, who then nods. 'So, just— I don't know. Have mercy on our poor, sad, pathetic, mom-ish souls and crash here tonight. You can have this room, there's like, a *lock* on the door and everything— not that anyone ever uses it—'

'No, they do not,' Brad adds with a shake of his head and a funny look on his face. 'They most definitely *do not* do that, even though I have *told*— well, maybe not *you*, but, like, every party for *years* I said there was a lock on this door—'

'*Fine*, Jesus *fuck*,' he snaps, but sleeping here at Brad Dailey's sounds no worse than sleeping at home. Actually, sleeping pretty much *anywhere* would almost be better. Fucking *Neil*—

If he actually thinks about it he knows it's only a matter of time before the man goes after him again.

Anyway, if he's at home he might end up *thinking about stuff*— and there'll be nothing to distract him, so—

But then Adam is sitting back on the edge of the bed. *What?* If the guy can sense something, thinks he's getting a *fuck* out of this— The dark haired guy gives him a *look*, 'I said I was gonna roll you on your side when you pass out.'

'Jesus fucking *Christ*,' he hisses. 'I am seriously not going to fucking *pass out* from not even one *whole* bottle of Jack—' He can see the guy isn't convinced. God fucking *damnit*. Fine. *Whatever*. 'If you want to waste your night staring at me then it's not my fucking problem— just get me another drink. I'm already getting *bored*.'

'Nope,' Adam replies, long and slow and unimpressed, lips popping on the 'p' sound. 'If you're bored we'll play poker for matches or something—' *what the fuck?* Grey eyes turn to Brad, 'Why don't you go get us a pack of cards?'

Brad starts bitching about being made to play fetch, which gets Adam bitching back at him, and while the two of them are carrying on Amy

creeps into the room, shutting the door behind herself, and flops down onto the bed next to him, carefully avoiding the wet spot she left. She looks at him, looks away, then leans in to whisper— eyes darting to both of the other guys warily— ‘What happened, it wasn’t —? Was it—? I mean. It’s not like I need *reassurance*, or anything lame like that, but it wasn’t *me*, was it?’

‘What?’ he blurts out, before his mind catches up with her words. ‘*Shit*. Um. *No*. Jesus fuck— *No*. It’s— Not something I want to talk about, like, *at all*—’ **understatement** ‘—But, yeah— *not you*—’ fuck. So fucking *awkward*. Oh God he is not good at this reassuring shit.

She studies him for a moment, before nodding. Decisive. ‘Cool. So, *poker*—’ she smirks. ‘I am going to *thrash* you all—’

‘Nah Uh,’ Adam declares as Brad finally leaves. ‘If anyone is doing the thrashing it’s gonna be *me*. Just ask anyone on the team— *not him* —’ he quickly says, looking at him, ‘Me and Hargrove have never played. But everyone else—’

‘But *Steve*,’ she says with a smirk. ‘I have played poker with Steve and I know there’s no way in hell you’ve beaten *him*.’

Steve—

—

He sucks in a breath and forces himself back to the here and now, tuning back in to Adam as the guy is saying, ‘Yeah, but that’s because he’s an *idiot savant* or something at the game.’

‘Don’t be mean,’ Amy says, settling back more comfortably on the bed. ‘Steve’s nice. *Sweet*.’

‘You only say that because he used to let you do whatever you wanted to him—’

‘Can we *stop* fucking talking about *Steve Harrington*!’ escapes as a snarl before he realises he’s about to speak.

‘Who pissed in your Cheerios?’ Amy asks at the same time as Adam says, ‘Aren’t you two friends? I could swear you two are friends—’

Don't tell me he's pissed *you* off now too—'

'He's done *jack shit*,' he snaps. 'He's done *nothing*. He's fine. He's a fucking *great guy*— I just don't want to think about him right now—'

Now they're both *looking* at him, and he knows he just sounded nuts, and he can't read either of their *looks*, but he thinks maybe there's something kind of *knowing* there and it makes him want to rip his skin off and run screaming into the night— But then Brad is back, chattering like the fucking *idiot* he is, and the next thing he knows they're all settling in to play poker, Adam distributing around boxes of matches like they're little kids. Not that he actually wants to play for cash. Fuck his life. This is so fucking *weird*— Oh. And Adam— and maybe Brad— are waiting for him to pass out.

Hah.

Last time he played poker was with Uncle Harry— First time he played poker was also with Uncle Harry. Uncle Harry taught him to play and since Uncle Harry shot himself he hasn't been in the mood for the game, but *fuck it*.

He loses track of time as they play, the only indicator of its passing the sound of the party outside the room getting louder and more stupid sounding— the occasional rattle of the doorknob and male and female complaints when they realise someone must have locked it— and the haze of blue smoke that begins to fill the room— even after Brad cracks the window.

He has his Gauloises— and Amy bums one off him until she tries it, giving it back with a filthy look, before pulling out a rumpled pack of Eves— "*What?*" she says at his *look*, "*They're pretty and they make my fingers look longer.*"— and Adam pulls out his own pack of Benson & Hedges and all three of them ignore Brad's whining "*Come on guys. I need my lungs. How am I going to play professionally with lung cancer —*" until the guy gives in and bums one off Adam with a moan of "*I really am going to quit. I fucking swear it.*"

He's out of practise, but it comes back quick. He goes from losing almost as often as Brad to winning almost as often as Adam after a few rounds— He's not quite as good as Amy though. *Fuck she's good.*

Hah fucking hah-hah— In another life she'd be girlfriend material. Or as close to a girlfriend as he's ever had. He's had *girls*— girls he's been with more than once. Girls he's been exclusive with for a while — but he's never had a girl who thought what they were was forever any more than he'd thought it himself.

Company for a while. A warm body. Someone to fuck— a body to learn and learn to please. Someone to joke with. Drink with—

Never someone to dream of settling down with.

God, why is he thinking about that shit right now. Why—

Did they used to go together, Amy and Steve? And what the fuck does it mean that he used to let her do whatever she wanted with him?

No.

Absolutely fucking *not*. Not right now. Not *ever*.

Not thinking—

Not—

—

Eventually Brad goes out in search of some beers— since apparently Adam's relaxed his momness in the face of him not actually *passing out*— so they drink, and play, and drink some more, and then Brad surrenders in the face of his undeniable inferiority at the game, and it's down to Adam and Amy and him— but Amy's getting tired— so is Adam— and *he's* getting kind of *bored*—

And it's all kind of slow and sleepy and he thinks he can remember throwing down his final hand and collecting up his little pile of winnings and telling them he's done. Thinks he can remember curling up on the bed. Thinks—

Thinks he's in his baby, by the side of the road. Huddled up in the back seat, knees pressed to chest. The car's still and dead. The air's still and dead, inside, and he knows outside, and he's singing to himself—

Scorpions, Rock You Like a Hurricane— but he can't remember all the lyrics and the beat's all off, too fast, breaths coming panted and panicked, and his arms are wrapped so tight around his knees and—

He's running through the forest. Running. Running towards—

—

He wakes up in the same fucking clearing near Steve's house as last time, sitting up and disturbing what is probably the same fucking *bird* to go fluttering off in a chattering panic. 'Fuck,' he curls up on himself, head in his hands.

30. Chapter 30

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For internalised homophobia, homophobia, mentions of weird vibes between older guys and underage guys, mentions of feeling demeaned during sex, mentions of girls being sexually assaulted while drunk, also mentions of misogyny, please let me know if I missed any.

Finally finished this chapter. Been working on it off and on for *ages*- which is probably why it's longer than usual. Anyway, here we have it... Steve's miserable wank. Thank you all for the comments and kudos, and I hope you're all safe!

He heads for his bathroom, for his shower— standing under the water for a long, long time before he can bring himself to grab at his dick— only— *who can he think about?*

No Billy. No Nancy— and like hell is he tugging his dick thinking about *Tommy* after last time. He still has *some* dignity left, thankyouverymuch. He tries imagining no one, just a girl to start with, a collection of *parts*, things he finds attractive— but what he's always found most attractive was the *person*. He wasn't into Nancy because of her eyes or her lips or her tits or her legs, but because she was *Nancy*. That— that *thing* that made her *her*.

So all his imaginings, all the attempts to build a girl in his head to jerk off to, just become Nancy and then become her telling him that he's *bullshit*. Same problem with trying to think about a guy—

Not that the guy becomes *Nancy*, but the guy becomes Tommy or Billy or some terrible Tommy-Billy hybrid that makes him feel guilty and that he knows is about to call him a faggot and maybe hit him.

So he tries to think of someone else, someone he's been attracted to

in the past, someone who's never done something that makes him *hurt*— a girl at first, but he's so stuck on Billy that he gives in and tries to think of a guy— but thinking of a guy makes him feel guilty, like he's somehow *tainting* them, and even if he pushes past that feeling—

He tries Richie Lewis, who's big and *strong* and has nice hands and is nice enough to him— *really* nice to him sometimes— and who he's seen with his shirt off, seen sweaty and stinking like a *man*— and maybe the guy isn't as good looking as *Billy*— eyes a bit too close together, teeth a bit too— ok, so Richie Lewis looks like an all-American, fairly attractive for *Hawkins*, cross-eyed *horse*— but it's not the *horse* thing that puts him off— or even the memory of Tommy's irrational hatred of the guy— it's—

Well. He kinda, maybe, possibly used to maybe have something like a crush on the guy, back when he was younger. Only— It's hard to work out what it is, but there were moments between them, moments when it was just the two of them— because his dad would get Richie around to do this or that but would never hang around while it was happening— and—

It's not like Richie Lewis makes him feel weird, except it is. *Weird* weird. Not *good* weird. Unnerved kinda— and most of it's nothing. Most of it's— they'd be having these perfectly normal conversations and all the hair on his body would be standing on end and he'd be desperate to be out of there. Yeah. Most of it— but there is that time —

The man's truck seemed to be lingering a bit too much outside his house after Richie had done some yard work for his dad— not that his dad, or his mom, were in town, but still the work had been very much *for his dad* and not *for him*— and he'd looked out the window to try and work out if something was wrong and—

Ok. So he thinks he caught Richie Lewis jerking off in his truck outside the house once and that's—

It's kind of— well. It is *weird*, isn't it?

He could never really look at the guy the same again after that.

It does mean the guy might be a bit— *sexually different*— so maybe he shouldn't feel quite so guilty for thinking about him, but at the same time. *Weird*. Kind of *creepy* weird. Probably not actually *creepy*, probably just—

Fuck it. Whether or not jerking off in your truck outside your employer's home when only his sixteen-year-old son is home is creepy— *personally* he felt kinda creeped out. So he can probably stop trying to justify the fact he doesn't want to jerk it to the thought of the guy.

Anyway, after Richie Lewis he runs over some of the guys in his class — but none of them are *Billy*, and the better looking ones all make him think of the guy in one way or another. Eyes nearly the same shade of blue. Red lips. Big, *strong*, blunt *manly* hands—

Or they're Brad Dailey or Adam Larrimer, who Billy is apparently hanging out with— and Brad's kind of—

He can remember this one party, when he and Adam had been struggling with some guy he thinks was the cousin of someone on the basketball team— but could have just been a blow in from out of town— and who had been caught by Becky Fitzgerald with his hand up the skirt of a passed out drunk Harmony Wyatt. Her *best friend*. Becky had been shouting and trying to kill the guy, the guy was swearing, spitting and trying to kill everyone back— and built like a fucking ox that seemed to have at least three sets more arms than anyone other than Billy in his *other form* should have— and neither he nor Adam were having much luck keeping hold of him— until Brad came marching over, *picked the guy up* and *tossed him out on his ass*. Just like that.

It's still impressive, thinking about it—

But thinking about it, other than it being *hot*, makes him remember that Brad and Tommy seem to absolutely *loathe* each other— Tommy especially after that night, though he has no idea *why*— and not long after that Brad seemed to start not liking *him*. Not like the guy hates *Tommy*, but kind of weird around him and avoiding him everywhere but on the basketball court—

So, yeah. Trying to jerk off to Brad Dailey who maybe hates him too seems a bit—

There's always Adam?

Adam is—

Hot. Yeah. Maybe the next hottest guy in town after Billy— and smart and nice and— but he's always had the sense the grey eyed guy was probably mocking him behind that straight, *white* smile.

Also Adam's not—

Well, he is a *guy*, but he's not, like—

Wow. Yeah he is kind of *weird* isn't he?

Adam's not quite so ragingly *masculine* as Billy. Or Brad Dailey. Or Richie Lewis. Or even *Tommy*—

He's a bit more—

Why the hell does his mind think *civilised*?

You know, rarely smells of sweat, hands not so calloused, nails all a little too *perfect*, drinks but not *too much*, apparently capable of recognising and *talking about* his feelings if the word of girls he's been with is anything to go by— also capable of working cooperatively, and doesn't seem to have a pressing *need* to be top dog all the fucking time—

Well bred as his mom would say— which is offputting in its own right. Because when she says things like that he's always had the sense she'd use the exact same tone if she was talking about a racehorse or a purebred dog.

He's also from a nice, middle class yuppie family— a little less well off than his own, but the kind of people both his parents approve of — and has been dragged to the same white linen lunches and charity drives as *he* has and—

If Adam moves back to town after college will probably just hire

Richie Lewis to fix things around the house instead of doing it himself.

Yeah.

He *is* weird.

Billy would never hire Richie Lewis for *anything*—

Billy might not have been able to outright pick that guy up, but he would have come over and beat him until he ran off with his tail between his legs—

Billy is—

—

Oh fuck. Oh hell. Oh *damn*.

He manages two, three, *four* long and luxurious tugs of his hard dick before a flash of Billy's face, Billy's *eyes*, cold and filled with the hatred they used to be, the *disgust*, is coming across his mind. *Faggot* the Billy he sees seems to whisper.

He kind of feels like screaming.

He's so— wow. *So many things*— but above all that now he's feeling frustrated and his dick's still kind of hard and—

What if he just strokes it, doesn't think about anything?

—

It works about as well as he expected, which is *not at all*. He's never been good at the parts of sex that aren't about the other person— and yes, that includes jerking himself off. If he's just doing it for the way it feels it seems all a bit pointless.

Honestly his favourite parts of sex have always been getting whoever he's with off— and, yeah, ok, part of that might just be his dick— All those guys whining about wanting a big dick, a real, honest to God, *big dick* should try it for a while and see how they feel— but maybe

they wouldn't care, maybe they're the kind of guys that don't give a shit about what sex is like for who they're with, but for him—

It's not like he hates it either, his dick, no matter what *Carol* used to say— just because he honestly doesn't care if he gets to stick it in anyone— in fact would rather not, not unless he's sure they can take it, and even then sometimes it makes him feel *weird*. He thinks it's guilt—

But he really doesn't hate it. Or have an *issue* about it— and yeah, sometimes he does feel bad— but that's mainly because the girls he's been with have always been wary of it and not because he resents not being able to stick it in them anyway. It really doesn't matter that much. Sex isn't just— it *can't* be just— it's about *more*, so much more, than just a guy getting his dick wet. A hand or a mouth or between the thighs or just rubbing off against someone, and even then that's second to him, because—

Sex for him, the *best sex* he's ever had, has always been about *his* mouth and hands, about the other person's pleasure, about feeling someone fall apart because of him— even with *Nancy*— brave Nancy. Nancy who insisted on conquering the challenge of his anatomy, who managed, who would climb aboard and ride him with more eagerness than any girl has ever approached his dick— but even then, even when things were *good* between them, they only ever managed the full fuck about once a week or so, because her body would need to recover after and he couldn't stand the thought of *hurting her*.

The absolute *best sex* he's ever had was sucking Tommy's cock, but he's not going to think about that right now.

Nancy is a close second. A *very close* second.

So—

Either he turns the cold water on full and hopes his dick deflates, or else he's going to have to—

And he knows the cold water trick won't work, and he knows all this is just going to end in him doing something he feels guilty about

anyway— so why not do it curled up in his nice, soft bed?

He feels loose hipped and embarrassed as he slinks off to his room, knowing he's going to be doing his best to get himself off while thinking about Billy.

The thing is— he discovers as he lies down, as his hands trace the lines of his body down to his dick, as he regrets, just for a moment, stripping those Billy scented sheets off and shoving them in the wash with the guy's sleep pants— because it'd been *days* and Billy seems mad at him and he'd started feeling guilty about the way he was *treasuring* those hints of the guy's scent still carried by the cloth— he has no idea of how to jerk off while thinking about Billy while also not feeling like he's being eaten alive by the shame of it— not that he's touching himself thinking about a *guy*, but—

Same as before. He *knows* Billy would hate it, even the *suggestion* of it, so—

It feels kind of like he's assaulting the guy, or some version of the guy trapped in his head, *helpless*—

And he kind of knows what he wants, where the temptation lies, imagining that pretty pink dick on his tongue, stretching his jaw, flirting with the back of his throat, threatening to make him *choke* but not actually— and it would be so much *better* than Tommy, wouldn't it? Because even though Billy isn't monstrously *huge* he's *bigger*. Longer, *thicker* and that seems—

Tempting.

And then he's feeling guilty about that, because he knows Tommy is sensitive about the size of his dick— and he knows it never bothered Carol and sure as hell never bothered *him*— and even though things — are as they are— it still feels kind of disloyal fantasising about another guy's bigger dick.

But Billy wouldn't want his mouth on his dick, and there's no way he can convince himself otherwise— and all his attempts to just make him feel *weird*. Like imagining they're both drunk and Billy doesn't know who he is, just a mouth in the dark—

And that really is *assault*, isn't it? Or at least something that would make Billy feel *awful* after. *Contaminated*— and he doesn't want to do that to someone, *anyone*, and has never understood how people can just—

And now he feels even more miserable. Fuck this hard on, it's like, *the worst*.

Maybe if he imagines Billy as he used to be, Billy who really, really, *really* hated him— in that aggressive, confusing, *flirty* kind of way— What if it's after practise, everyone else gone home, just the two of them alone in the locker room, in the showers— him not realising the other guy is there at first— ok, ok, he stretches out, scratching his fingers through the hair on his chest, over a nipple— shuddering at the little spark of pleasure but not chasing it down. *Guys should not have such sensitive nipples. It's weird. At least Amy's the only one who ever worked that one out*— spreading his legs a little before reaching down, giving his cock a *determined* stroke. He can do this. He can—

Billy would shove him up against the wall, the two of them naked, *wet*, grinding his face against the tile as the other guy *put him in his place*. Because Billy hated him, *hated* him, wanted to *hurt* him, punish him for some sin he didn't remember committing, so the other guy would be aggressive, would be *mean*, and it wouldn't be about sex for the blond, it wouldn't be about *desiring* him, liking him, *lov— any of that*. It would just be cruel. It would just be a reminder that as far as Billy was concerned he was *worthless*.

So the guy would pin him in place— and Billy could do it too, even *before*. No point kidding himself. Guy has always been *strong*. Pin him in place and grind against him and he'd be confused but the *feel* of him, Billy, *big and strong and*— his sweat has always smelt good. Clean— or maybe not so much *clean* as *healthy*. Cologne or not— like a *man*— and he'd be trapped, made to feel small and stupid and weak and— he'd have to, have to, to *take it* and—

A sob escapes before he can stop it, body curling up into a confused ball of desire and abject *misery*.

It's terrible and weak and *stupid*, but he doesn't want to be treated like that— even though that's probably all he can hope for with Billy

— maybe even with most guys.

Fucking hell— is he a *girl*? Wanting to be treated *nice*.

Except he's not. He's never felt like a girl— not that there's anything wrong with being a girl. A *woman*— He likes women. Always has, and not just in a *sex* way— And he likes the things people say make a woman a *woman*— Taking care of people instead of living just for himself— but he still doesn't feel like a woman. He feels like a *man*. Just a—

Failure of one.

A weak, pathetic, *faggy* loser.

No wonder he's got no friends— other than Robin, but she's far too good for him— and no wonder Billy's sick of him or whatever—

He can't even get himself off properly.

Jesus.

If only it could be simple. If only there was something he could think about, *remember*, without it all making him feel *sick*. Like that night, Billy naked in his bed, pressed against him— if only they'd— in their *sleep*, so there's be no *blame*— curled even closer, rubbed off against each other, so he could have woken in Billy's arms, feeling *safe* and *protected* or whatever and *sated* and— maybe Billy wouldn't have been angry. Maybe they both could have pretended it didn't happen. But it could have been a memory he could have kept, brought out in moments like these, and only felt kind of guilty—

What if it had happened though? *What* would have happened? Not from the inside, but as an outsider looking in, what would their bodies have done while their minds were too deep in sleep to drive the situation?

Billy was naked, half underneath him, but *holding him in place*— and it's not like he didn't try to wriggle free while the guy was asleep, it just didn't *work*. Because Billy really is scarily *strong*. Billy's dick was against his thigh too— So what if, asleep, Billy had grabbed at him, pulled at him, until their hips had lined up? Yeah. Yeah— That's.

That's *better*. Because it's— it's not his *fault*, not *Billy's* fault, and the blond couldn't be that angry about it, could he?

He imagines those big, strong hands pawing unconsciously at his back, his waist, pulling his hips down and holding him in place while Billy grinds up mindlessly. There'd be no kissing, but that's alright, there'd be no careful exploration, finding out what the other *likes*, but that's ok, and it's not like he could suck on Billy's big, strong *blunt* fingers, but that's—

But what if it hadn't been like that? What if they'd both been awake and Billy had wanted it too? Would they have kissed? Would he have gotten a chance to suck on Billy's fingers? Would Billy have stroked his dick? Could he have sucked Billy's dick? Would the other guy have wanted more? He does know what that more is. He's heard about it in the locker room— always spoken with a sneer, everyone acting all grossed out— and there's what Carol did. The first time. the second time.

Billy wouldn't have wanted him to do *that* to the blond, but would Billy have wanted to do it to *him*?

Would he have let Billy?

And the flash of no and every time he's ever been touched like that the next thing he knows he's being called a faggot and the people involved are moving further and further away from him and no one will ever stay around if he lets them quickly gets absorbed into Billy wouldn't want to anyway.

Billy wouldn't want *any* of it.

The guilt rises, thick and cloying, and he *forces* his mind away, forces it back to his fantasy, the two of them *asleep*—

Yeah. They'd be asleep. Groin to groin—

And maybe Billy's hands would worm their way under his pyjamas, push them down, grope over his hips and back and ass as their bare dicks lined up— Billy's pretty perfect sexy dick— rubbing up against each other until, until—

He comes before he realises it's about to happen and then lies there panting, feeling torn up and confused and sad and kind of—

Yeah.

Lonely.

And he's too tired right now to clean up, so he just wipes his hand on his sheets, grabbing the edge of them and dabbing at the mess on his belly, before curling on his side and trying to sleep.

It's stupid. Because now he *misses* Billy on top of the guilt he's trying not to feel, and the missing makes it feel like he's *reaching* for the guy as he's falling asleep, and as he falls, falls, something *lurches* and something that's been barely holding on feels like it *snaps* and for a split second it's like he's dislocated his *self* but then—

Notes for the Chapter:

I thought maybe I should mention that just because Steve in this fic isn't into the whole *Billy happening to him in the shower thing* doesn't mean I'm trying to shame anyone who is. Steve's just- very unhappy and feeling a bit delicate. Poor thing.

31. Chapter 31

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For suicidal ideation, emotional child abuse, starvation, possibly body horror, please let me know if I missed any.

Another Steve chapter... I'm not sure if the next one will be Billy or Steve, and since Steve is temporally ahead of Billy whether I should go back to Billy to catch him up. We shall see, I guess. I hope you're all doing well, that you're safe and coping as well as can be expected with everything that's happening. Thank you, as always for reading, and for the comments and kudos and everything!

It's heavy. He's heavy. It's *dark*.

He tries to sit up.

He can't.

He can't move at all. He's completely paralysed.

Panic.

He struggles, struggles, *struggles*— nothing happens. *Nothing*. He can't even hear the breath that should be panting in his ears, feel his heart thundering in his chest— feel *anything*—

But he can hear something.

It takes a moment to work out what it is, for everything to start to make enough sense he can try and figure things out. A voice.

A familiar voice—

Though sounding tired and even more *wrecked* than he's ever heard before—

Billy he tries to call out, but no sound escapes.

‘—Yeah. I really have finally lost my fucking mind, huh Dead Girl? I should not have come back to this shit hole— You saw the fucking— *whatever the fuck they were*— on that thing. Looked like it wanted to fucking run me though. Spider-looking— At least I know it’s not *that* fucking *bastard*. Didn’t look like— what did it look like to you? Looked kind of like what I think we— but can’t be. *He’s* out there, enjoying his life, everything gone one like fucking *normal*, not stuck in here with us—’

Billy he tries again. Still, nothing, nothing except—

The darkness is lightening. Not much, just enough that he’s starting to make out a blur of something around him. He thinks he’s lying down, looking up at the sky— except it’s like the sky is falling— or is it *snowing*? Something’s drifting down, landing on the face he can’t feel—

He wishes he could turn his head to look around him, but he can’t. All he can do is lie there and listen to Billy— sounding almost *mad* and more than a little *broken*— rambling on about monsters and dead girls. He wants to get up, find Billy— so close, he sounds so close, but he can’t *see* him— do *something*, anything, to help. To make that tone in his voice go away. Make him feel *better*—

He can’t.

He’s still *trapped*.

The fear is starting to get swallowed up by the sheer *frustration*—

Billy! His mind bellows.

Nothing.

—

And then there he is, Billy— his face far above him, looking down on him, except— *Oh*. He looks *awful*. Thin, haggard, *dirty*— blond hair hanging down in tangled locks and dark with grime— face a mess of uneven, untrimmed scruff. But it’s still *Billy*.

Ok, yeah, a pale, sickly looking Billy with tired, red eyes and a kind of crazed energy about him, but still *Billy*.

‘Are you the problem Dead Girl?’ the guy says, making no sense, because he seems to be addressing *him*— ‘Are you why I can’t just fucking *die*? Is it because you’ve been left behind and I’m the only one to remember you? Capable of giving you a decent fucking *burial*? If I drag you out of here and put you in the dirt will I be finally left in *peace*?’ It’s a furious hiss by the end of it, but he’s barely listening.

Die?

No.

Something *lurches* again. Falling. *Dizzy*. His sense of self spiralling, spiralling, spiralling— A gasp. He sucks in a breath, deep, staggering, almost losing his balance, almost tripping on—

‘*Barb?*’ he breathes out and then *panics* because that is not *his* voice. Hands go up, grope over face, hair, beard, throat, chest— he looks down. *Grimy*. Shorter than him. Thin now, but still the bones are heavier set, fingers blunter—

Billy. He is Billy—

But he’s still *Steve*. He knows he’s Steve. He’s just Steve in Billy’s—

Body.

His gaze goes back to the crumpled pile of bones and tattered flesh, familiar clothes, the hair still shining such a bright copper in the strange light of the place. ‘Oh God,’ he breathes out, whirling around, taking in what’s around him.

‘Oh God—’ this is— this is his *pool*, but drained of water and with horrible rotting vine-like *crap* everywhere and stuff falling from the sky and— ‘The Upside Down.’

This is the Upside Down, it has to be—

Which means he has to be dreaming, because he can remember lying in bed— doing what he did— and he can remember waking up here,

but there's no bit in between, and if he was really here there would be a bit in between— Also, he would not be in Billy's body.

A nightmare, that's all.

A nightmare because of the shit with his pool and Billy ending up in it and— and because he *misses* the other guy. Worries about him. That's all.

A nightmare.

—

'Oh God Billy, even if this is a nightmare I can't leave you here,' he finds himself saying. It's true, he *can't*. He needs to— to—

What?

Inside. It has to be better inside the house, doesn't it? More comfortable than lurking around on the bottom of his pool with Barb's dead body, anyway.

The first few steps are more a staggering lurch than anything else. A body seems like it should just be a *body*, but it's like his sense of gravity is just a bit *off*, his limbs too short, his hips and shoulders not quite where he expects them to be, and everything feels kind of *numb*, like he's not quite present, not quite in full control— but by the time he's made it to the ladder and climbed out of the pool he's almost got the hang of it.

Wow. Ok, yeah—

Um—

His house looks like *shit*. Oh God, what is all that crap everywhere?

This place is so gross. *So gross.*

Smells wrong too, and the air's weirdly *thin*, unsatisfying when he breathes it in, leaving his lungs feeling hollow—

Also it's *cold*.

He glances down again, takes in the torn, stained wifebeater— ‘A sweater,’ he says out loud. ‘I’ll get you one of my sweaters—’ if his sweaters are still inside his house. If that’s still his house. If—

He walks— a little awkwardly, but no longer a drunken *stagger*— over to the nearest garden bed, poking around until he finds *that* rock and flips it up, pulling the spare key up from the cold, kind of *slimy* ground beneath. ‘Wow, *so gross*.’

After letting himself in he locks the back door, just in case, leaving the key on the kitchen counter as he goes looking for something to feed the blond’s body. There’s a sense of hunger, not quite *immediate*, like it’s his own, but sort of vague, coming from the body he thinks— it’s still not *his* body.

When he turns on the taps nothing happens, so he goes to the fridge, thinking maybe some of the soda he keeps around for the kids will still be there— he slams the thing shut the moment he opens it. ‘Holy hell, *yuck*,’ what the *fuck* is that in there? It’s—

Everything is *rotting*. Corrupted or something, and the contents of the fridge—

He shudders. *Ick*.

He tries the cupboards next, but it’s all the same, it’s all— ‘There’s no food, is there? Not here—’ Billy must *starving*— and there’s nothing he can do about it.

‘Oh,’ he mutters, then ‘*Shit*. Oh God man, I don’t know what to do—’

Cold. The body is still cold. Even with the distance between him and what the body is feeling he can feel that.

Feeling kind of helpless, unable to help, unable to really *fix* anything, he goes upstairs, heading for his own room. He feels like apologizing to Billy, to the body, even though it’s not his fault— except it kind of is, because it’s *his* nightmare— Why did he have to decide to dream about trapping Billy in the Upside Down? Not cool of him.

He hesitates outside of his door— He’s not sure he wants to see his room in the state it’s probably going to be in— Even though he’s

never had full control over the place, always been at the mercy of his mom's redecorating whims or his dad's coming in whenever he wants — mostly to remind him of what a failure, what a *disappointment*, he is— it's also the closest thing he's ever had to a space that's just *his*, where he can pretend he's safe— More literally in recent years than just safe from the reality of the world.

Slowly he pushes the door open, looks around— it's—

Actually not that bad. Compared to the rest of the house his room doesn't seem too affected by the rot. It's still dingy, still smells *off*, but none of the vines or whatever they are have made it inside.

He glances at the bed, wondering if Billy would like to lie down, *rest*, but before that— he heads to his closet, contemplating his sweaters. The thing is, they'd all look so *nice* on the blond— not that *that* should be his main concern, his main concern should be that Billy's cold— but still— That navy blue one, with Billy's golden hair and blue eyes— or the burgundy— or the black silk-cashmere blend that's always made him looked kind of washed out—

Yeah, that one. It'd been a present from his mom— who had then been disappointed when he'd tried it on and demanded he never wear it again— And it's a pity, because it's so soft and warm and—

A little dusty, the purity of the black faded to a kind of charcoal colour, but it's still intact, not *rotten*, and it goes over his head— *Billy's* head— easily and once he's smoothed it down he finally turns to the mirror.

'Oh,' he sighs, and it's got two meanings, because on one hand the black of the sweater looks so good against Billy's colouring, and Billy is still so amazingly good looking, but at the same time the blond looks even worse than he'd thought before. Thin, *too thin*, tired, *exhausted* even, and the grime is everywhere, and the hair might be a complete write-off—

Why is he dreaming of the other like this? How can his mind be so cruel?

Billy looks good with a full beard though, very *masculine*.

Wow, yeah, he really is turning into a *pervert*.

He wishes he could control this dream, instead of being forced to ride along inside of it. If he could he'd be here, in his *own* body, Billy as Billy, and then he could wrap the other in his arms, and because it's a dream, yeah, Billy might not even *object*.

Still, he does the best he can, wrapping Billy's shorter arms around Billy's torso, feeling the bones so close to the skin even beneath the sweater. His gaze goes back to the bed— the blond looks like he needs about a week of sleep— and it's not like it can be all that comfortable sleeping in the bottom of his scary pool all alone with dead Barb.

As he's heading towards it his gaze catches on something else— his bat. Leaning by the bed where he left it. No sign at all of the rot of this place— he scoops it up as he climbs onto the bed— he's about to curl up on his usual side, but—

There's *something*—

He shakes it off. The sense of *no, there's no room for him, there's already something there*— the whole experience is so weird he doesn't even question it, instead curling up on the side where Tommy and Carol— and *Nancy*— used to— Hands curled in fists around the grip of the bat.

If something comes for Billy he'll do everything in his power to keep the blond safe, everything—

Something lurches again. He almost drops the bat, his grip on it coming loose, but the hands, Billy's hands, tighten instead, even though he can barely feel them anymore. He tries to sit up, tries to fight the sudden feeling of being *yanked* at, a weird kind of dizzy, lurching— he blinks, *blinks*, vision going bleary, for a moment sure he sees someone else in the bed with him, brown hair spread across the pillow, long, knobbly fingers lying on the sheets, twitching, almost *reaching* for him, but then everything *lurches* again—

32. Chapter 32

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for domestic violence, internalised homophobia, a bit of body horror- please tell me if I missed any.

Ok, we're back to Billy again. Steve's present is still in Billy's future so for now the plan is to catch Billy up to Steve- that may change, depending on writer's block etc. To be honest I'm not sure if it's the right choice stylistically- but for now it's the choice I'm making. I hope you're all safe and well- they're talking about starting to ease up restrictions here from next week, which will be weird- and thank you, as always, for the kudos and comments etc. This fic wouldn't have made it so far without you all. (Also I'm really hoping you'll all forgive me for how long it's going to be before Billy and Steve are spending time together again. Billy just needs to get his shit together a bit first)

It's early. That's— *something*.

He follows what has to be his own trail— wide, destructive, heading in a different direction than last time— and wonders if his baby is somewhere out here or if he—

Walked is probably not the right word. He's afraid *skittered* might be though.

Like a fucking *spider*.

Yeah, ok, he can admit this is a problem at this point, but he has no idea what to do about it so he's gonna just— *ignore it*.

Yeah.

Ignore it.

Walking gets a bit boring after a while so he starts jogging, then running, even though his boots, jeans and silk shirt aren't exactly appropriate work out gear. He doesn't have all day though, and he knows, well *suspects* at first, *knows* part way into it, that he can run pretty fast and maintain that speed for a fairly long time because—yeah. *Ignoring it.*

So he's back at Brad's house and in his baby and speeding along the quiet, early morning streets back home before too long, Gauloise hanging out of his mouth, the urge to blare his music suppressed. No. He does *not* want any attention right now.

Of course the problem with getting home early is his dad hasn't left for work yet— the man's car still out front. He parks a couple of houses away and hunkers down, chain smoking and eying the front door until he sees Neil— followed quickly by Susan— emerging.

She goes to lock the door but Neil grabs her roughly by the upper arms, shaking her, mouth flapping and he's out of the car before he's thought about it, stalking over in time to hear his dad berating the woman, calling her a *stupid bitch* and going on about how she *can't do anything right* and that she *better be ready on time for tonight or else he'll—*

Her eyes are huge in her face as she looks at him, and he can't tell if she's begging for help or begging for him to fuck off and not make things worse but all he can feel is *anger*. 'Get the fuck away from her!' he snaps.

Neil straightens up as tall as he can— and he *hates* that the prick is taller than he is— and looks at him with *disdain*, hands tightening on Susan's arms until she can't hold back a little hiss of pain, before releasing her so roughly she stumbles. For a moment they're staring each other down, him and his dad, but then the man turns and walks away without saying anything. As if he's invisible.

Fuck him.

'You alright?' he asks, turning to Susan. She looks— small. *Hurt*. Not

just physically but—

‘I—’ she begins, and for a horrible second he thinks she’s about to cry, but as he watches she pulls herself together. ‘I have to go, you’ll pick up Max later?’

‘Of course,’ he replies, watching her scurry off to her car.

—

Shit.

And yeah, it’s not like he didn’t know his dad was going to start hurting Susan at some point— he knew, Max knew, Neil himself must have known— about the only person who could have been in the dark about it was Susan herself— but it’s still— He *hates it*.

How long’s it been going on for? That’s the other thing. He doesn’t know. The way she acted— that’s not the first time the old bastard’s hurt her, but that’s the first time *he’s* seen it—

So it’s been going on behind closed doors— and he doesn’t want to think about the implications of *that* either—

Fuck.

Fucking hell.

The thing—

The thing is—

He’ll do it again. And *again*. Now it’s started. There’s no way he can hold himself back, not Neil, not when the thing he should be *not doing* is hurting someone—

So he’ll do it. Again and again and one day he’ll do it in front of Max and then *all hell will break loose*. Because Max won’t put up with it, he *knows* she won’t, so she’ll—

And then Neil’ll—

And then *he'll*—

Because he's not letting his dad hurt her, not *Max*. Not *ever*—

Fuck. Another thing he does not want to think about.

Like—

Like—

He lets himself into the house, brushing the tangle of his hair back from his face.

So.

He wants to fuck Steve.

The thought echoes unpleasantly through him as he treks to the kitchen to make some coffee but he can't keep running from it. It's—*undeniable*. He wants to fuck Steve.

Fuck. Makes all that stuff about jerking off in the guy's bathroom make a hell of a lot more sense.

So. *Is he a faggot?*

Hah. Fucking— *hah*. What a fucking question.

Jesus.

How to even go about working it out?

Well. He wants to fuck Steve, so maybe that's answer enough, but—

The thing is he does actually like girls. He thinks. He *does*, yeah— Like Amy. She's sexy, he finds her sexy. Fucking her was *good*— Though it left him feeling kind of *empty*. Even before he— *whatever he did*, at the end there. So what the fuck does that mean?

It's all— yeah.

Once he's finished his coffee he does his weights, piling on more again, wishing his body would *burn* the way it should.

So many things to worry about.

So many things he can't bear to think about.

So many—

One at a fucking time.

When he's done he finds himself lounging against the kitchen cupboards, Gauloise between his lips, beer in hand. Yeah— Ok. OK.

Steve is a guy, right? It's not like he's got his head all turned around and misfiled the brunet as a chick— is it?

For a moment, just a moment, he lets himself think about Steve. Steve's *body*. The things about Steve that make him want to—

And it's legs and hair and teeth, but it's also the span of those wide shoulders, those slinky little hips, a long neck that is also, undeniably, *masculine*— and more than that, more than the physicality of the guy— *Steve is not an object*— Steve is—

Sweet.

Sweet in a way that's not about gender, is it? A *transcendent* kind of sweetness.

So, does he want to fuck Steve *because* he's a guy or *despite* the fact he's a guy?

While he's contemplating this unpalatable question the phone rings. He almost lets it ring out but in the end decides to answer it because it means he can put off thinking too deeply for a moment.

It's Adam.

After the greeting of, 'Oh, so you are still alive. That's good— Was worried you'd splattered yourself against a tree for a bit there when we woke up and both you and your car were gone,' and him telling the guy to *fuck off*, feeling almost— not *fond*, but like he kind of doesn't mind the dark-haired guy— Adam gets to the point.

Pool's open. He can come in. Turns out it wasn't Joey Mackinson shitting in it that broke the equipment. Instead it was an infestation of salamanders or something in the pipes. Adam doesn't know for sure. *Fucking weird, man.*

Anyway. Yes. *Work*— a fucking *Godsend*.

He needs to pull himself together.

He makes sure to clean up real nice before heading to the pool— cleaning up around the edges of his facial hair where things are getting a bit fucked up from neglect, doing his hair as good as he's ever done it, looking at the man he sees reflected back in the mirror
—

Did he always look that hard? That mad and unhappy?

The scars seem like they're a bit more prominent than the first time he saw them, but—
—

Before he leaves he rings Max, tells her he's back at work and that he'll be around to pick her up later. Maybe they could have pizza or something for dinner— his dad's got a work dinner thing at his boss's place— he thinks Susan said something about that— and he's pretty sure that “the wife” was also invited so— probably the cause of the morning's *tensions*.

Means him and Max will have the house to themselves.

What a fucking *relief*.

33. Chapter 33

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For internalised homophobia, homophobia in general, bi-erasure, panic attacks, mentions of child abuse, domestic violence, and child sexual abuse- please let me know if I missed any.

Well, here we have a bit of unexpected productivity. Still from Billy's POV, as the plan is still to catch him up to Steve. I hope the fact that he can't stop thinking about Steve is some balm for the lack of actual Steve right now. Thank you all for reading, and for the comments and kudos, and I hope you're all doing well, and are all safe!

He swaggers into the pool like he owns the place, head up, shoulders back, smirk on his face— Eyes catching on all that bare flesh—

Adam heads over all big, straight, *white* smile and says, 'Yep. Salamanders or some shit. I don't know. Like. I *know* they're amphibians and stuff— but, I do not know enough about them to be able to identify what *type* they are and these ones look *weird*. So—'

'Is there a point coming up soon?' he sighs. Why the fuck the guy thinks he cares about *salamanders* of all things is beyond him. Jesus.

A shrug. 'I got here in time to get a couple of them—'

'Why? You one of those guys who keeps snakes as pets or something?'

'Oh no, they're *dead*,' Adam replies. 'Just thought my cousin might want to have a look at them. Try and identify them and dissect them or something—' at his *look* the guy hurries to add, 'She's not, like, *psycho* or anything. She's studying biology and zoology at Notre Dame. You want to see them?'

'Not particularly,' he replies, fishing out a Gauloise and offering the

pack to Adam.

The guy shakes his head, waving off the offer. 'Me and Brad are thinking of going drinking out by the quarry tonight, if you want to come—?'

He raises a brow, 'This offer coming from a guy who felt the need to babysit me because of *one* bottle of Jack Daniels.'

'The fact that you can't see the difference between a few drinks and chugging a whole bottle of Jack makes me worry about you, man,' the guy says, only half joking.

He shrugs. Almost says *yes* for a moment, but then he remembers *Max*, but— 'I have to pick up my sister. Parents have got some—*thing* on, so we're having pizza.'

Adam *looks* at him for a moment. 'How about *one* beer after work?—and after I've dropped the dead salamanders off at home.'

'Why the fuck do you want me to go drinking with you?' like, *what*? Why does Adam want him around? Most guys don't like him— He eyes the dark-haired guy for a moment. He doesn't think the guy wants to fuck him, but—?

Fuck. *Get it together Hargrove*. Not every guy is a faggot even though —

'I'm bored and you are surprisingly entertaining,' is what Adam says. 'And, yeah, kind of a *jackass*, but nowhere near the jackass I thought you were considering the amount of time you've spent hanging out with Tommy H.'

He is *not* thinking about that guy right now. If he thinks about Tommy he'll start thinking about *Steve* and then—

But he does kind of have to think about Steve, doesn't he? Or at least about—

He shakes the thought off for long enough to agree to going out for *one* drink— because, yeah, he really does need to spend time with Max, and then they go their separate ways— Adam to go looking for

more dead salamanders or whatever it is the guy does when he's not on the chair— which is where he's headed.

Sitting up there, looking down on the increasing number of people, all of them in the skimpiest fucking swimsuits money can buy in Hawkins Indiana, and he gets to thinking—

A lot of things. But most relevant is that he can *look*, see if it's more than just Steve, see if other guys get his motor revving, all while he's got an excuse to be looking. He can look at the *girls* too. The *women*. Because it's all not sitting right, all not *coalescing*, wanting to fuck Steve but still so sure he likes fucking girls too.

It doesn't make *sense*.

So, once he's got himself comfortable in the chair, shades on, cigarette between his lips, he lets his gaze wander— trying to ignore how *exposed* and weird and kind of *guilty* it makes him feel. To start, because it's easier, he checks out the girls—

Chelsea's back with her itty bitty little white bikini and awkward forced sexiness— and she's hot— though the observation is kind of ruined by the memory of the fucking horrible *noises* she made with his dick in her mouth. There's other girls he recognises from school too— some with Chelsea, some not, more than a few sending flirty little looks his way— and, yeah, there's at least five of them he can imagine fucking, *wanting* to fuck. Sexy each in their own way. Hot bodies, pretty faces— and the thought of what it would be like to go down on them, to push his fingers up into them, to slide between their thighs makes his dick throb a little in his shorts.

It's *real*. He's sure of it—

More sure of it when he spots Karen Wheeler— swimsuit cut high at the legs, hair shining blondish in the light, a little makeup on but not as much as she usually would if she expected to see him. Their eyes meet for a moment— and he can see she's surprised, that this isn't a display for him, this is her come to watch her little blonde kid paddling in the kiddie pool, not anything more— but then she looks away— and even though he doesn't want her with the intensity he once did he still kind of *wants her*. Because, more than just a body,

she's a good person, nice and kind and sweet, and he *likes her*— and all that adds a weird kind of temptation to the business.

He's never really thought about whether *liking* someone made them more attractive before, but maybe it does—

Yeah.

Yeah. *It does.*

Best sex he's ever had— other than with girls who were the kind of wild and experienced and capable of blowing his fucking brains out through his dick with little more than a *touch*— has always been with girls he's also had fun hanging around with.

So maybe that's all the Steve thing is. Maybe he's just *confused*. For all he might protest, he never really has had many male friends. Yeah, *Jay*, but Jay was— well, *gross*— or, not necessarily gross, but— *Steve's* all clean and neat and well dressed and *polite*. Jay wasn't exactly the kind of guy who'd bathe every day, or shave every day, or — It's not that Steve's *girly*, so much as—

Jay was a big, sweaty, stinky, vulgar, loud, rude, *guy* kind of guy. The kind he usually hates. The kind who usually hates him. The only things they had in common were a love of drinking and smoking and *partying* and really not liking seeing girls getting *hurt* by big, mean, *nasty* bastards like Jay's stepfather.

Otherwise there were some guys he'd drink or party with, smoke weed with when he was in the mood— which was less often than it was for them— or *surf* with. And the thought of being vulnerable in front of absolutely *any* of them— the way he has been in front of Steve— makes him feel like punching something.

The thought of them being *sweet* to him the way Steve is kind of gross. Yuck. Skin crawling kind of—

—

Except—

What was his name again?

There was a guy— not one he hang out with one on one that often, but a friend or a cousin of Matty who he used to surf with— another surfer— all long legs and smooth dark skin, hair in all these little braids— *Jeromy*—

Shit.

Oh fucking *hell*.

Because he was *looking* at Jeromy too, wasn't he? Because he can remember the shape of legs and hips and neck and that slightly shy but also a bit *mischievous* smile in a way he can't even fucking remember the colour of Jay's eyes or what Matty looks like beyond tall and gawky and exactly like the kind of guy who smoked as much weed as he did.

—

And the thing is he and Jeromy didn't exactly get on, did they? It was like every little thing the guy said or did got under his skin, felt like a *criticism*— Like with Steve at first.

Except he never *hurt* Jeromy.

Just—

Snapped at him until the guy started avoiding him. Easy though, Jeromy wasn't exactly— He was *sweet* too. Calm. *Calmer* than Steve even. Not the sort of guy who throws a punch unless it was the last possible option.

—

He tries to force his mind back to the here and now, but his thoughts keep tripping away from him. He really doesn't want to be thinking about what it says about him that there's maybe two guys he thinks he might have been attracted to, might have *liked*, at some point— Steve he kind of *still*— and they're two guys he treated—

Not very well.

That stuff, the *feelings stuff*, can wait. First he really has to work out if

he's—

But how can he be a faggot if he likes girls?

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuckitty fuck.

It all builds up in him, strangling him, his breath catching in his throat again— *fuck*. Ok. Breathe in. Breathe out. Etc. etc. Now, *keep breathing*, but keep breathing while also checking out the guys here at the pool.

Does he find any of them hot?

Not the fucking big old bastards, that's for sure. All big hands and no fucks given about the way they look, hairy and stinky and *rough*, the kind of guys who'd be grabby and get off on getting the person they're with *dirty*. Yeah. Yuck. Probably *hit him* too— probably beat their wives and molest their kids. Yuck. Yuck. Yuck—

His skin is fucking *crawling* just thinking about letting one of them touch him—

The faded little men seem a bit less— *gross*. The ones that were never really man enough. Beaten down husbands or guys who could never get a girl in the first place, some of them men whose wives are looking at *him* right now, licking their lips and soaking their swimsuits at the thought of fucking someone a bit more *alive* than the sad little mummified men they married. Those little men, all skinny and kind of awkward— they're not so bad, but it's still not—

Hot.

They look like they'd be about as much *fun* as moving the lawn on a hot, windy day. A *chore*.

So. Guess he doesn't have *that kind* of daddy issues— Hah fucking hah-hah.

—

That's something, at least.

He turns his attention to the guys he went to school with— not that many around, but a few. Mostly jocks but a couple of nerdy little dweebs.

Can he imagine kissing any of them, *touching* them—?

Fucking them?

Ugh. It feels like a million eyes are on him right now, *burning into him*
—

Fucking *uncomfortable*.

For a split second he tries to imagine sucking a dick— not even anyone *specific's* dick. Just a dick.

He almost launches himself out of the chair from the full body shudder of panic—

Ok. Ok.

Calm the fuck down.

Does that mean he isn't interested, isn't a faggot after all, or— ?

The thing is he can't think about sucking a dick without all the fucking *filth* he's had hollered at him by old pervs running through his head and—

It feels *demeaning*. Some bastard shoving his *prick* into his—
—

And just *imagine* what fucking *Neil* would say. Do.

The man would fucking *kill him*.
—

Shit.

Fuck.

Jesus fucking Christ.

He forces himself to breathe, to release the grip he has on the arm of the chair when it starts to *creak* like he's gonna break it—

—

Ok.

So maybe thinking about sucking dick is a bit too much. Going a bit too fast. Pushing it all too far.

What about just kissing?

Could he kiss a guy?

His mind goes straight to Steve's pretty coral lips, always looking so *soft*, like the guy uses chapstick or something—

Yeah. He could kiss Steve—

Fuck.

More importantly, *could he kiss a guy not Steve?*

His eyes rove over the potato faced jocks, their well tended bodies, all those *muscles*— and that flinch of— of— *Don't you fucking look down on me*— bursts through him again, but he pushes it down.

Maybe.

Most of them aren't that hot though— *Adam's* probably the best looking of all of them— his glance flicks over to the dark haired guy, walking past on fuck knows errand all bare chested and little red shorts. *Could he kiss Adam?*

He waits for disgust. Doesn't really come. Waits for *desire*. Doesn't come either.

So, yeah, he could probably kiss Adam but also he doesn't really want to.

Who does he want to kiss?

Forget the fucking jocks, forget— forget— Just fucking imagine it's a world where you can kiss who you want and it says nothing about you—

Karen, yeah. Some of those girls he sees— his eye catches on a slender, broad shouldered body. A good looking young guy a few years older than him— college student home for the summer maybe — at the pool with what look like younger siblings and their friends — and he doesn't even look pissy about it. Laughing good naturedly at something a kid that looks a hell of a lot like a younger him is saying—

From this far away he can't tell what colour the guy's eyes are, but he thinks they might be blue. Blue eyes. Auburn hair. *Sweet* smile— looking at those kids he's with like he would never *dream* of breaking a nose or a jaw or anything— and he really is good looking too— in a kind of clean shaven, neat hair, all *preppy* way— all long legs and long torso and—

A moment later a girl the guy's age— and that is not a *Hawkins* girl— if anything she looks like she's from Miami or something— trots over with arms full of Pepsi cans, handing them out to the kids, before playing keep away for a moment with the guy— who eventually catches her wrist and pulls her in to extract both the drink and a kiss to the accompaniment of the whines of the kids with them—

He clears his throat, looks away.

Yeah. He could probably kiss that guy.

Fuck.

Ok.

Fuck it.

He's pretty sure he can now say that he probably does like guys. *Some* guys. Not just, like *every* guy. It's not like he's been waltzing through life as an oblivious dick seeking missile— just *some* guys.

Just—

*He'd still rather kiss **Steve**.*

So.

Yeah.

Seems like maybe he's kind of a faggot, but—

The shape of her body catches his eye as Karen stands up from where she was leaning down near the kiddie pool, picking up that little blonde girl of hers and walking back over to the lounges—

*Why can't this shit be **simple**?*

He can't bear thinking about it anymore, so he tries not to. Goes about his day on autopilot, trying to keep his eyes off both the guys and girls. Karen. *Everyone*.

—

34. Chapter 34

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For domestic violence, child abuse, and homophobic language, please let me know if I missed any.

New chapter, yay-ish. Yeah, we're still with Billy, yeah there's no Steve, honestly at this point I don't blame those of you that are jumping ship for jumping ship. I promise they will get together eventually, but promises are only words, right? I did write a (possibly) one-shot Billy/Steve fic which is the opposite of this absolute slow burn. It's [Flashfire](#) if you're interested. Anyway. Thank you all so much to those who are still here, still sticking with this mass of delayed satisfaction masquerading as a fic, it means so much to me. Thanks especially for the comments and the kudos. Above all though I hope you're safe and well!

If he thought having *one* drink with Brad and Adam after work was going to be particularly interesting, he was wrong. They don't say much worth listening to when they park out near the quarry and stare at the water. Adam talks about their day at the pool, and the fucking *salamanders*— and don't they just sound fucking *gross*— Brad starts going on about playing basketball professionally, he drinks his beer and smokes his Gauloises.

Still. At the end there's something like a suggestion that they'll do it again sometime. Weird.

Weird but not *weird*. Like. He's pretty sure neither of those guys has any ulterior motivation other than wanting a distraction from boredom, which he can put up with, since they don't seem to want him to play jester or anything. Just show up. Drink. Be himself.

It's the weirdest kind of relief to see Max, and even with— *everything* — he finds himself smiling like an idiot when she climbs into the car complaining loudly about Mike hanging around all the time when she wants to spend time with El and Will. At least by the time she's actually paying attention to him instead of staring out the car window and waving goodbye at the kids in question he's managed to get his face under control so he looks less like an idiot.

He tries to keep at least half his attention on her endless rambling, but his mind keeps skittering away to places he doesn't want it to right now, places he won't let himself think too much about when what he wants is some— oh fuck him dead— *family time*. So. Mainly he thinks he's coming off about as distracted as he's feeling.

Every now and then he catches her *looking* at him, but she says nothing and he says nothing so neither of them end up saying anything about it all the way through pizza and TV— and for a minute he almost wishes she wanted to watch some of her stupid nerd shit— but apparently she's moved onto shows starring boys she thinks are hot so—

Yeah.

Also distracting. Not wanting to but ending up looking at legs and shoulders and arms and waists and backs and necks and faces and being unable not to think *would I?*

And sometimes the answer is something like *yes*, even though reassuringly it's quite often *no*.

Then. Right in the middle of him quietly freaking out and Max going on about which guy is hotter, fucking *Neil* storms in, Susan on his heels. She seems to be trying to reason with him but the old bastard is ignoring her.

He feels Max tense up on the couch next to him— just like *he's* frozen. Watching. Waiting to see what Neil will do.

The man seems to finally register their presence, *sneering* at the two of them, absolute and undeniable *hate* in his eyes— before continuing his flounce towards their parents' bedroom.

Susan makes a kind of helpless little noise, looking at them like— and he doesn't know what that expression means. It's not a *good* expression, he knows that. 'Ah—' she breathes, then composes herself. 'Do you two need anything before I go to bed?'

He glances at Max, back at Susan, wonders if he should ask if everything ok, wonders if asking that will call the whole shitshow down on his own head, wonders—

'No mom, Billy's got it covered,' Max answers while he's still wondering.

'Oh, well, *goodnight*,' she says with a staccato little wave.

Well.

Fuck.

That's the night ruined— not that it wasn't already— whatever it was. But. *Yeah.*

Not long after that he and Max give up on pretending they can go back to watching TV when Neil's gone to bed and is probably lying there fuming about the noise they're making, just waiting to snap and come storming out.

She says she's going to go read some nerd book he's never heard of, and he's— Shit. He does not feel like reading. He does not feel like doing anything—

Over the years having to retreat to his room at night in— *concern*— Neil might be *Neil* about something meant it was a good time to jerk off. Unless the guy was already shouting or letting him know he was *in trouble*. But if Neil was just in a sulk and didn't seem liable to come storming in to try and knock his block off until at least *after* he was asleep then, you know, *Max* would be in bed. Susan would be wherever it is Susan is when she's not in front of him. Neil would be — probably drinking and lying to himself that he's not a fucking loser and a monster. So—

Except, yeah, he does not trust his hands on his dick right now— Well. Not his *hands*. Where his *mind* might go if he tries to jack it—

It's gotta be enough for one day for a guy to admit to himself he sometimes wants to kiss other guys. Being faced with the idea he sometimes jerks off thinking about them too is just—

Though. *Does he?*

Of fucking course he does. What was that shit in Steve's shower if not —

Except it's not just *guys* is it? Not males of the species in general. Recently it's been—

Seriously. Who was he kidding? Fucking *brown eyed brunettes with long legs and shit*—

That whole *thing* with Chelsea just because he saw Steve in a swimsuit and got a bit *excitable*.

Yeah, well he knew at the time it was a bit— *off*. So. So—

So he sleeps badly, and wakes in the dark to half remembered dreams and the sense that he's gotta be somewhere, that he's slacking off, not keeping *him* safe— with a *presence* in his room. His breath catches, his nostrils flare like he can scent whoever it is, but then his ears catch on the familiar sound of shaky breaths.

'Max?'

A sob answers him and the next thing he knows she's climbing into bed with him. 'Jesus, I could have my dick out,' he half grumbles as he moves over for her to bury her face against his chest. This is new. Comfort's usually confined to the lounge room, but he can feel how much she's shaking, can guess how bad the dream was. 'Want to talk about it?' he asks, petting her hair gently.

She shakes her head, huddling against him.

Shit.

He can feel tears soaking into the muscle t he wore to bed, but she's not sobbing or anything. Just completely quiet as she trembles and cries and he *hates* it all of a sudden. If Max wants to sob her fucking

eyes out she should be able to. The spectre of Neil shouldn't be hanging over her head like it is.

Stupid fucking *Susan*. Why did she have to get involved with a man like his dad? Even if it meant he and Max never met it would have been so much *better* for her if her mom had got with someone else, someone *kind*— or stayed with Max's dad. The man never seemed *cruel* and Susan didn't leave him for hitting her or anything, as far as he knows. The guy just— he had an affair. Just the one. Surely a guy who might cheat on you every now and then is better than a guy who might break your face?

Eventually Max stops crying. 'Sorry,' she says, all thick and phlegmy. 'Maybe I didn't scream this time or maybe you didn't hear me, but you weren't in the lounge room, so—'

'It's fine kid,' he says, voice soft. Fuck. He's feeling all fucking *paternal* or something. This town, man. This town.

It's changed things so fucking much.

She makes a little, sort of *panicked* sound and blurts out, 'I like you so much more *now* than the way you used to be, please don't turn back into old Billy, ok? Ok, Billy? Don't turn back into old Billy and don't *die*! Promise me you won't die!'

'I'm not going to die,' he says, and maybe there's a tinge of bitterness there, because he has no fucking clue if he *can* even die, but she doesn't need to know that. 'I'm not going to die and I'm not going to turn back into the prick I was before, I fucking *promise*.'

'Good. You have to keep it though, you have to—' She cries for a bit after that, every now and then mumbling something about him not dying or acting like he used to, before she calms down and eventually starts to drowse. He lies there, Max huddled against him— and it's weird, isn't it? People touch him these days. Max— *Steve*.

His mom used to, he thinks. Ruffle his hair, push it back out of his face, pet him on the shoulder, hug him— and when she was gone Uncle Harry would pet him on the back or on the top of the head and call him a *good kid*, before— But *since*. The most body to body

contact he's had in years was *fucking*—

And basketball. But not usually. That level of— *whatever it was*— that was because of Steve, wasn't it?

Yeah.

Fuck.

In the dark, listening to Max's wheezy little snores, he lets himself remember the first time he saw the brunet. It wasn't at that party, where Steve looked right through him, face like he was sucking on a lemon— It was a couple days after they came to town, him speeding down the main street, pulling up at a red light, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, eyes roving the shit-hole fucking Neil had condemned them to— and there was this brunet, walking down the sidewalk chatting to a girl— fucking *Wheeler*, he now knows— and the brunet was— *eye catching*, and something almost like happy, smiling, looking at the girl like she was the centre of his world—

In those moments before the light turned green and he sped off he'd felt *something*. Something like an urge to storm out of his car and wipe that innocent smile off that— *pretty*, he'll admit it now. Steve is *pretty*— pretty face. Make that seemingly carefree guy feel the way he felt. Make him— Make those eyes— and Steve had been far enough away he hadn't even been able to see they were that lovely, velvety brown— make them turn to him. Just for a moment. He'd wanted to be acknowledged, to be *seen*, by that good looking, slender young *man*—

Fuck.

And then then everything else happened all leading up to the night he almost *killed* Steve and then—

Now he's here, in the dark, feeling like a damn *fool*.

Another thought creeps in. One he thinks maybe he wants even less than any of the others. *Is Steve actually a fag or is that all just wishful thinking?*

Is it just *him*, while Steve himself—

Yeah.

That is *not* a thought he wants to be having right now.

Or *ever*.

35. Chapter 35

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for themes of domestic violence and child abuse, homophobia, biphobia and erasure, please let me know if I missed any.

More Billy, more Billy making progress, yay! Still no actual Steve I'm afraid. Thank you all so much for sticking with this fic, and for the comments and kudos! I hope you're all staying well and safe out there!

Good Goddamn thing Neil and Susan go off to work before he has to, because he wakes— still where he went to sleep for once *thank fuck*— to the sound of the front door slamming and realises Max is still in here with him. That would—

He can just *imagine* how his dad would react to that. It would not be good. Yeah.

He prods her awake once he's sure neither of their parents are about to show up and start shouting. 'Hey, Maxine. Time to wake up— I've gotta get to the pool.'

She makes an obnoxious whining noise, manages to stretch and smack him in the face, and while he's reeling from that sits up to wipe at the drool running down her face and blink at him blearily.

Wow.

Ok. He has not seen Max first thing after waking up before and— He starts snickering. Can't help it. She looks so— *stupid*. Red hair escaped from the braid she had it in to stand up all around her head like she's been electrocuted, then there's the drool, then there's the look of almost *bovine* incomprehension—

'What?' she snaps. 'Jesus, *what?*'

'Looking like a badass there, Mad Max,' he manages between

snickers, dodging her when she starts swatting at him.

By the time he's dropped her off at the Wheeler house for the day he's decided that he's not going to think about any of his recent unpleasant revelations. Not, like, *permanently*, but just not today—maybe not tomorrow either. He needs time or something to wrap his mind around it all.

It's hard, because apparently what his mind actually wants to do is pick at it all like he's trying to pick the world's biggest, *nastiest* scab, but if he focuses on work it's a bit easier. So, yeah, maybe he's even snappier than usual at the dumb fucking kids and the dumb fucking things they do out of what seems a compulsive need to crack their skulls open or drown themselves, but he doubts anyone really notices.

And it's all— it's. Something. Ok.

He works hard, signs himself up for more hours so he's got something to keep his mind occupied, chats with Adam, picks up Max— who has apparently had a fight with Wheeler Jr, or some shit, about something that sounds really, *really* stupid— and they're both home in time for dinner and the unpleasant revelation that Neil is also home for dinner. For once.

The man's been— *elsewhere*— a whole lot lately.

It's— One of the most tense dinners he's ever had, and that's saying something. Neil is— *quiet*. But not still or calm or any kind of quiet other than *a towering inferno of wrath barely containing itself* quiet. Also still ignoring him. Susan looks *terrified*. And by the end of it Max is chattering nervously pretty much to herself with her chair pressed as close to his side as she can get it.

He— He's *tired* of this shit.

He almost wants to pick the fight he can feel coming on the horizon to get it over with.

Jesus.

After they've eaten his dad storms away from the table— chair falling

over when he pushes it back in too violently— and disappears into the bedroom. Susan barely relaxes.

She comes to sit with them and watch the TV for a bit— which strongly biases the business to shows with hot guys— *No. Not looking. Not this time*— while he smokes and Max still remains pressed to his side.

She's *frightened*, even if she would never admit it. *Pisses him off*.

If only she was old enough, that way they could both get out of here. He could get an apartment or something, she could— Well. She needs to finish school and once she's finished school—

Fuck. Does Susan even have a college fund started for Max? No way he can afford it— What about her dad? Goddammit. She's *smart*. She deserves better to get stuck in Hawkins forever.

It's later, after he's done his weights, after he's flicked through a skin mag and seen sexy girls and weirdly missed *Steve*, that it occurs to him that Neil would be well within his rights to chuck him out of the house. And, yeah, wind back all those months to when they first moved here and he'd planned to just pack up back to Cali the moment he was eighteen, or had enough money, or— But he's been eighteen a while now, had enough money probably even back then— though the shit with his car— and the way he's been drinking and smoking recently have been eating into his savings— and—

He does not want to leave Hawkins.

Don't get him wrong, he *hates* this shithole town. *Hates it*. But no way is he leaving Max, not with Neil, and— and—

Ok. Not thinking about Steve.

But, other than— *that*— Well. Fuck everything but he thinks maybe he's kind of started to settle in now. Become *habituated* to the place.

—

Fucking *weird*.

—

Anyway. Moving out would probably be better than waiting for Neil to finally blow his top— but that means leaving Max here with the old bastard. Not something he wants. At all. Seriously, *no fucking way* is he leaving Max without him around in case the old man—

Should he start looking for a place anyway?— No. Not yet. No— What he should do is start trying to save up some cash in case he has to. If it comes to it surely he can find somewhere nearby— and Neil and Susan are hardly home, so Max could come around whenever anyway, and—

Jesus.

Fuck.

Good thing he already signed himself up for so many hours at the pool. Yeah. He must have been *prescient* or something.

The middle of the night has him and Max huddling on the couch again until she feels she can sleep— Will this time. Possessed by the Mind Flayer and killing them all, tears rolling down his face— and fuck does she have a good imagination— and he's just thinking maybe all that— weirdness— with him sleepwalking must be over.

And then he wakes up in the forest behind Steve's house again.

—

At least it's early enough he can get back home before Max misses him.

So, yeah, maybe he's kind of *snappish* at pretty much everyone. Even Max— though he tries to rein it in. But.

But he is losing his fucking *mind*.

How else can he explain the— the *thing* where he wakes up behind Steve's house all the fucking time. And he knows, just *knows*, he wasn't good old regular *human shaped* Billy when he was making his way there. Jesus *fuck*.

It's the dreams, it has to be, but he can barely remember them when he wakes up. Just a sense of— It's the Upside Down. It's—

Well, it makes sense, doesn't it? After everything that happened.

That he ended up kind of—

Fucked up.

So, yeah. There's that, on top of—

Everything else.

It's just— He has no fucking clue what to do, *at all*, about *any of it*. So. So—

Yeah. Ignore the sleepwalking or whatever part as much as possible and try to, you know, *cope* with the other stuff.

Fuck. The *other stuff*.

It's just. Just. A *fucking horrible day*. That's all.

At least Neil's gone for dinner, off at yet another work thing. Susan making noise about him getting a promotion soon with eyes that say how much she no longer believes the shit her husband's spouting.

All three of them end up in front of the TV again— even though it's Friday night and he could be at a party, would be getting his dick wet, could be doing all kinds of things—

Max makes noise about them doing something with Steve and her shitty friends the next day, but he tells her he's working. He's always working— or at least that's the plan. Working or working out, sometimes eating. Trying not to waste his cash on cigarettes and booze— and it's hard to cut down on the smokes. Fuck is it hard.

It's all—

So hard.

Fucking hell he feels about as miserable as he did when they first

moved to this shithole town. Jesus.

That night he tries barricading himself in his room— weights in front of the door, window locked— and then he tells himself he isn't going to sleep. Is going to stay up all night, is going to—

He wakes up behind Steve's fucking house a-fucking-gain.

Jesus fucking *Christ*.

By the time he's run back home he's on edge, really *on edge*, and even the way Max seems well rested and eager to tell him all about the way she slept through— no bad dreams for once— barely dents the—

Is it rage?

Fuck knows.

Whatever it is it's so hard to just drive her to the Byers house *fast* instead of *stupidly fast*. And then— Well. He *almost* doesn't go in to work. Almost just keeps driving— does in fact drive out just past the edge of town before he stops himself, turns back. Shit.

Fucking—

Yeah. Ok. He drops by the 7-11, buys more smokes from the bored looking and less interesting than *Candy* girl behind the counter for once— ignoring her flirting— then.

To the pool.

Where he smokes and seethes and even all the girlies usually so eager to attract his attention seem to want to avoid him.

'Shit man, you are *tense*,' Adam says mid-afternoon. When he's pretty much given up any pretence of actually working and is huddling in the shade chain-smoking. 'Anything I can help with?'

'Fuck off Adam.'

'Party at Brad's?' the guy offers.

‘Are no one’s parents ever fucking home in this shithole town?’ he snaps. How many fucking parties can one guy throw? Fucking—Brad. Tommy H— *asshole*— and he’s heard St— *Steve* used to throw them all the time back in the day.

‘Not if they’ve got the money and time to be *elsewhere* all summer,’ Adam replies with a shrug. ‘So, you up for it?’

‘Jesus. *Fine*. Fuck. I’ll see if my sister can stay with her friend.’

‘She can’t stay home?’ Adam asks, and he can see something clever and *assessing* in those grey eyes.

He stares back, expression flat, until Adam looks away. No way is he explaining fucking *Neil* to the guy. He’s not here begging for *pity*.

Of course it takes forever and trying all the kids’ fucking numbers at least once to get a hold of her, but then she’s telling him she was going to ring and ask if she could stay at the Byers’ again anyway, so — Whatever.

The thought of the party doesn’t make him feel any better— yeah, the thought of getting absolutely fucking *wasted* on someone else’s dime sounds good— but what’s there for him at a party? He hates, like, 99.9999999999% of the shitty music people like *Brad* like. He also hates, like, 99.9999999999—whatever% of the people in this town. And he doesn’t even want to go out and get his dick wet.

He can’t even be bothered with the usual date night kinda prep, instead sticking to jeans and a white t-shirt— realising halfway to the party that he’s wearing the exact same fucking clothes he wore when he went to talk to Steve about the Upside Down the first time. His *nice guy* clothes.

He misses Steve.

He doesn’t want to miss Steve.

He doesn’t want to think about it.

Whatever he thought was going to happen at the party it probably wasn’t chatting to Adam for a moment— before some girl he thinks

maybe he's slept with drags the guy away— then skulking around until Amy spots him, drags him onto the dance floor, then the two of them spend most of the rest of the night sharing a bottle of bourbon and smoking while she makes amusingly *vicious* comments about everyone passing by, Brad seeming to be always lurking somewhere nearby, watching them with a real fucking *weird* expression. Dark and hot and he'd think *jealous*, but jealousy doesn't quite fit, and when he asks Amy what the guy's problem is she replies "*ignore him, he's enjoying himself*," and he's thinking *what the fuck?* But at the same time he *does not care*.

It's— *funny*. Hanging out with her is not like hanging out with— with — yeah, ok, *Steve*— fuck does he miss Steve— but at the same time it's kind of like back in Cali and the group he'd go out with, party with, drink with, shoot the shit with. Relaxed. Not— *close*— but not making him want to punch someone.

And there's something to that kind of bubble effect when it's two people against the world. Not that he and Amy are— but he can't deny that he's nodding along with pretty much every cruel and entirely too ugly-accurate statement she's making about everyone else.

Maybe it's just there's something almost like *safety* when you're with others more like you than most. Anyway.

Fuck.

Ok.

Admitting it is embarrassing, fucking *humiliating*, but he feels cocooned enough in the moment that he lets himself *look*. At the party. Eye level with everyone else instead of up in the chair. At— just, *everyone else*.

Imagining what it would be like— no labels— but if he could just—

Go up to whoever. Guy. Girl. Either. Whatever. Anyone he glanced at and thought— *yeah, you*. Just for the night. Maybe just for a *dance*. Maybe for *more*—

Looking at bodies and seeing bodies— girl bodies and guy bodies— and thinking *hot*.

Hot.

And by the time he's piling into his car to drive home he's pretty much been forced to accept that he is attracted to *both*.

And *both* means—

He does his weights before bed, not thinking about it for a moment, then washes his face and brushes his teeth and has a piss and climbs between his sheets and—

Both is *bisexual*, isn't it?

He can remember Max explaining it to El.

Which isn't to say he's never heard of bisexuals, of course he's heard of bisexuals, but he's never given it much thought as an option. Always thought— like she said people think— that they were just faggots in denial. Or maybe just degenerates out to fuck whoever would let them. Or even sometimes— when he'd been feeling a bit more generous— wondered *why*, if a guy likes *girls* as well as guys, he'd want all the trouble that comes with going after *guys*.

Hah.

Fucking hell.

But he is, isn't he?

Now he's actually faced it instead of ignoring it. Because that's the only thing that makes sense.

He is *bisexual*.

Has probably always been bisexual and just gone about his life *ignoring* it or something.

So what's he going to do about it?

36. Chapter 36

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNINGS: for domestic violence and child abuse, please let me know if I missed any.

Here we are with Billy again and his degenerating family life. Still no Steve. So sorry. I'm not sure when I'll be able to get the next chapter out. It will probably not be before the end of next week as I'll be a bit busy. Thank you all for sticking with this story, and for the comments and kudos! I hope you all are well and safe in this sad, worrisome world.

Of fucking course he wakes up behind Steve's house again.

As he begins the run back he can't help admitting that he's not exactly doing much to *avoid* waking up here. He's still going to bed each night, still sleeping, hasn't tried to chain himself to the bed or anything—

It's *weird*, yeah. Skittering his way across town in his sleep, probably in his— *other*— form, but— but.

He *misses* Steve.

He misses Steve but he can't bring himself to face the brunet. So. In a warped kind of way. *This* shit makes him feel just a little bit—

Closer to the guy.

It would be different if his other form had ever shown any intent to *hurt* the brunet, but honestly, *instinctively*, he feels more like it, *he*, would do anything in his power to keep Steve *safe*.

He's gotta keep Steve safe.

Yeah—

Even from himse—

Fuck. Ok. Thoughts there he's not gonna pursue right now.

This has all gotten so routine by now that his guard's down. He's not really thinking about anything as he lets himself in to the house— maybe doing his weights again before a shower, heading to the pool —

And then there's fucking *Neil* waiting for him, eyes dark with outright *hate*. For a moment he can see the man struggling with the urge to take a swing— but his dad fights it down to throw a tantrum instead. Going on about where he and Max always are, why they're always out— insinuating they're both out *slutting around*, that he'll get some girl pregnant and Max'll come home with a inbred hick *bastard* in her belly— and *he* almost takes a swing himself at that— and that from now on that's *it*. Enforced fucking *family time*.

He's then sent out— still in last night's clothes, stinking of sweat and smoke and bourbon, fucking *great*— to fetch Max from the Byers.

So, looks like his dad is over ignoring him.

Fuck.

Mrs Byers— who, honestly, seems like a real nice lady. A nice lady who he'd bet has had a pretty fucking *hard time* in life— greets him looking all concerned. He doesn't try to flirt— never has with her. There's *hot mom* and then there's— and it's not that she's not a looker, she is, in her way, it's just that hitting on her seems kind of— *sacrilegious*. She's too much a *Mom* mom.

Her momness is too inherent to her and he's not—

Well, he's fucked up, but he's not fucked up like *that*. Any more than he has those kind of daddy issues.

Also, you know, he's pretty sure Chief Hopper would kill him and bury him out in the woods. So, there's that.

The guy in question comes to the door and *looks* at him. 'Everything ok, ki—?' and at least the man swallows the end of the "kid" this time. Still pisses him off though. The Chief clears his throat. 'Everything ok— um— *young man?*'

That is not better.

'I'm sorry, when Max asked if she could spend the night I totally forgot we have plans today with the family. *My fault,*' he replies, trying to look like he's not lying through his teeth.

They seem to buy it.

He thinks.

Maybe.

Ok, yeah, he catches the Chief looking at him out the front window as he and Max head back to the car. So— There's fuck all he can do about it.

'Neil's being a dick,' is what he tells her when she piles into his baby, whining at him about not remembering any "*family shit*" they had to do.

'Oh.'

Oh indeed. Worst is that he still has to go in to the pool, which means leaving her with his dad— and *Susan*, of course, but Susan hardly counts these days, does she?

He hates it.

Hates it.

He lingers after his shower, keeping an eye on his dad— planted in front of the TV watching his stupid war movies— for as long as he can, worried the man will snap and go marching off to Max's room to beat the shit out of her or something.

He's gotta make it clear to the guy that he can't touch Max, that there'll be *consequences*— but even if Neil is wary of *him* right now he very much doubts the man will take him threatening to rip the guy's head off if he ever hurts Max seriously—

—

Chief Hopper.

His dad's— whatever his dad is— but the man's not *that* stupid.

Max is El's best friend. El's dad is—

He determines to mention the Chief as much as possible in front of Neil. Go on and on and on about how close Max and El are and how upset El would be if something ever happened to Max and how much the Chief— and he'll make sure to mention exactly how *huge* and tough as hell the man looks— loves his daughter and isn't going to take anything upsetting her kindly. Maybe play into some of those small-town pig stereotypes.

Maybe mention how well the Chief knows the woods.

Neil would have *no chance* if it came down to a fight between him and Chief Hopper. The cop's hands are, like, the size of his dad's *head*.

Maybe. Just— *maybe*— if things go south the Chief wouldn't take his old man's side. It's not like the few times they've spoken's enough to really get to know the man— and he is still a small-town, hick, *cop*— but so far he hasn't got a sense that the man's— *Neil's* type of guy.

More the type of guy to look at his dad and see the *pissant* the man actually is.

Maybe.

Eventually he has to concede defeat and go in to the pool— and if he was in a bad mood the day before it's got nothing on the mood he's in today. He must be putting out such *lethal* vibes that even *Adam* gives up on trying to talk to him after one good, solid glare.

You'd think being left alone would make him feel better.

It doesn't make him feel better.

He skips out on work as early as he can— not his usual *modus operandi*, you know, he does *try* to take work as seriously as he can— just to rush home and discover Neil's apparently fucked off at some point during the day.

It'd be a relief, but it's a real fucking *scorcher*, hot as balls, and there's Susan looking all kinds of pale and wan and wearing a long sleeved blouse— left hand lingering on her right wrist, doing her best to avoid using that hand too much.

She looks at him, eyes wide and kind of desperate and the whole night— through dinner and shitty TV and Max's happy enough chatter— it's like the woman is begging him not to say anything. Not to tell her daughter.

Jesus fucking *Christ*.

—

Neil doesn't come home that night.

Neil still isn't home the next morning, everyone creeping around, shoulders up, tense, waiting for the old bastard to come and ruin everything.

But the man's still not home that night, or the next morning when he gets home from the woods behind Steve's— but just when he's started thinking his dad's skipped town he comes home from the pool on Tuesday night to find Neil— all dressed up in his good suit, Susan in one of her good dresses, and *Max*, Max home when he didn't know she was home, Max stuffed into a frilly, lacy thing he didn't even know she owned— the kind of pink that clashes with her hair— *scowl* on her face, and the news that the three of them are going out to a nice, fancy, *family* dinner to celebrate his dad's new promotion. A dinner to which he is pointedly *not invited*.

It's—

Yeah. Well.

Apparently being home, *alone*, Max off somewhere with fucking Neil and Susan, no Goddamn distractions from that— or from all the other — *stuff*— is just too fucking *much*.

He tries to keep his mind blank. Does his weights— adding more, yet *again*— and he's going to have to do something about that, because that's all he has, he can't add any more, and it's *way too easy* to lift as if is— then having a shower, then sitting down to watch the TV— but he can't. He can't calm down. He—

So then he's pacing, back and forth, back and forth, feeling like he's going *nuts*, and then—

It starts with a beer from the fridge, but he doesn't even feel it, and he's been good, hasn't wasted any of his cash on booze, but he fucking *needs* to calm the fuck down before he does something stupid.

Stupid like drive into town and drag Max to safety out of whatever fancy fucking restaurant Neil's got her in— *Enzo's*, he'd just bet— or — or—

Drive around Steve's, see if the guy will let him in. Not to— Of course, because Steve's probably not even— not— but—

But.

Steve makes him feel *calmer*.

Kind of.

Thinking about Steve sure as hell doesn't recently, but *being with* Steve
—

—
What he needs is some bourbon. A bottle, maybe two— then he can sit his ass down in front of the TV, drink himself into a semi-stupor, and maybe fucking *relax* for a minute.

Yeah, he knows he's kidding himself.

Doesn't stop him getting in the car and heading to the liquor store

though. Cheap. *Cheap* bourbon— Fuck. He's going to have *no* money if he has to move out the way things are going, and with summer starting to wind down the pool won't need anywhere near the staff it has now.

Funny, isn't it. In a few months' time the whole town will change. All the parties held by kids in his grade that are going to be off at college will stop— the kids themselves will leave— and then it'll just be him and Steve and the other poor losers being left behind. The kids a year behind will become the kings and the queens, the ones holding the parties— and maybe most guys in his position would latch on to them, try and act like their glory days aren't fading to nothing trapped in their small, *irrelevant*, town, but him—

What the fuck is he going to do if he doesn't fuck off back to Cali?

—

Yardwork, that's right. Or some shit. *Billy Hargrove, small town Handyman*. No way is he getting a job at the Big Buy or something—he is not cut out for *customer service*. It'd all end with him losing his shit and shouting at someone.

He's trying to work out what's the cheapest— but still drinkable— bourbon in stock— not that there's much around with all the fucking *parties*, Jesus— when the chatter of familiar voices makes him look up from his bottom shelf perusal. Adam and fucking *Brad*, heading straight for the beer.

'Oh my God, you guys are *not* throwing another party?' he blurts out when the two come to a surprised stop at seeing him.

'What?' Adam blinks. 'Oh. No man. We're going out to drink a few by the quarry and listen to Brad's shitty music—' a slight pause. 'Want to come?'

Why the fuck not? It has to be better than being at home, worrying about Max, trying not to think too much— And, yeah, he's going to have to think about the whole *bisexual* thing at some point. Soon probably. But soon doesn't have to mean *now*.

37. Chapter 37

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for homophobia, and not just homophobic language or internalised homophobia(though they're here too), but that unpleasant experience of homophobia from someone who might otherwise be a decent human being. Also self destructive thoughts and a touch of suicidal ideation, as well as references to domestic violence and child abuse, as well as an oblique one to racism.

I feel like there're so many things I could say here, but all of them sound trite. The world is a depressing place, yet I sincerely hope this time there will be change that lasts, and a fairer society for all of us and for the future. I hope you all stay safe out there! Anyway, on to the depressing chapter. Thank you all for reading, and for the comments and the kudos!

Later, lounging against the hood of his baby, half a bottle of bourbon down, a haze of Gauloise smoke hanging around him in the thick, hot, *still* night air, Brad's honestly, *undeniably* shitty, mindless pop songs blaring from the speakers of Adam's Mercedes, Adam babbling on about how interesting his cousin apparently finds the fucking *salamanders* he got her he does, kind of, regret it. But—

—

'No one's seen you and Harrington together for ages now— Thought you were friends— at least that's what everyone's saying. Did he actually, really do something to piss *you* off too—?' Brad says out of nowhere.

He blinks, looks up— gaze flickering to the ash on the tip of his cigarette. Shit. Must have zoned out. *Wait, what—?*

‘Of course not!’ he snaps.

‘Come on, *leave it*,’ Adam says to his friend, shoulder bumping him.

‘Like, I know he’s—’ Brad begins, but Adam keeps bumping at him until he whirls on the guy. ‘Am I saying something? No I’m fucking not, ok? I’m just saying it’s ok if Hargrove here finds Steve weird. You know. He’s really not *all that*—’

He doesn’t expect it. That’s the thing. Everyone— or at least everyone *not* Tommy H or that bitch Carol— are always all *Steve’s a good guy* if it comes up. Even if they’ve been *real* assholes to the poor guy—

So, this big, potato-faced jock acting like hanging out with Steve would ever be something but a fucking *privilege* startles him for a moment, and once that moment’s over— He’s maybe, probably, yeah, *probably* going to hit the guy. It’s something for his self-control that he doesn’t for long enough for Adam to start correcting his friend, the end result being, ‘Steve’s a *good guy*,’ Adam snaps, and, ‘You really need to— just— *fuck*. Get over it, Jesus.’

‘Get over *what*?’ he hisses, eying the two of them. He still wants to hit Brad, but that would be a bit— *weird* now, wouldn’t it?

Why is he even worrying if it’s weird?

When has he even *cared*?

Jesus Christ he’s losing it.

Brad’s mouth opens, shuts, then the guy glances a little helplessly at Adam— who answers for them. ‘Just, you know— Steve was friends with Tommy H. Tommy H. is a *dick*— that’s all. Brad’s just being *stupid*—’

‘if that’s all it is— why aren’t you two friends with Steve now he’s not friends with that fucking limp-dicked little *prick*—?’ ok, maybe that came out a bit more *vicious* than the situation warrants. He doesn’t want the two of them thinking he’s—

He’s—

—
What he is.

A shrug from Adam, flippant, dismissive. 'I don't know. He ended up some kind of social *pariah* or something, and once he quit the team—' grey eyes flicker over to Brad's stony face for a moment. 'We really should invite him out with us one night, or to one of the parties— not that he couldn't just turn up if he wanted. It's not like he was ever explicitly *uninvited*— but maybe he needs a proper invite. I'll invite him—' those eyes flick over to *his* face, 'If that's alright with *you*, of course?'

'Why wouldn't it be?' he snaps. 'Steve is *great*. He's a really *great* guy.'

Oh God he should just go home. This was a fucking *mistake*.

'You know, he actually *is*,' Adam muses, giving Brad a *look*.

Yep. He is not oblivious enough that the fact there's some kinda *subtext* going on he doesn't understand is going over his head, but—

All the rage he should feel just seems like it's turned to sorrow for a moment. Fuck. He really does *miss* Steve— He eyes Brad, Adam—

Whatever reason Brad doesn't like Steve is probably small and petty and probably has Tommy fucking *H.* at the heart of it— because that guy is a raging Goddamn *dick*— He fishes out a new Gauloise and lights up, sucking in the smoke—

He does not want to think about Tommy H. right now.

Wow— this is him, backing down from what might have been something like a fight.

God he's *tired*.

Yeah, he's sleeping now, sleeping enough to make his way across town each night while he's doing it— but he never feels *rested*— probably because he is *making his way across town* each night.

He's not proud of it, but he lets it go. Has reached a point where he'd

rather focus on his bottle of bourbon and his cigarette than interrogating Brad about why the guy doesn't like Steve. Fucking—

Who the hell doesn't like Steve—? Other than Brad— Other than *him*, back when he first came to town.

Fucking—

Stupid—

And is it Brad or is it himself the latter's directed at? *Stupid.*

He finishes the last of the first bottle of bourbon and briefly considers chucking the empty into the dark, still water of the quarry, before sighing and getting up to dump it in the footwell of his baby and get the second bottle.

'Damn Hargrove, you really can *drink*,' Adam says, eying him slightly blearily from the guy's perch on the rocky shore next to Brad.

He snorts. 'You're just a lightweight.' Not true, but better than saying something about it being because he's actually a literal fucking *monster*.

Adam— and Brad— start on about how that's not true, that they can drink most of the team under the bus— and the Hawkins basketball team are fucking *notorious* Hawkins the for their tolerance or some shit— blah, blah, blah.

'Whole town's fucking lightweights,' he dismisses as he cracks the seal on the new bottle.

—

Halfway through the second bottle and the world's gone kind of loose and warm and fluffy. His head feels heavy. Everything's all alright—even their inane chatter— and *why the fuck* do they want him around anyway? After *that night* when he almost killed Steve he's been happy lone wolfing it more often than not— when he's not out to get his dick wet— instead of hanging around and trying too hard to make friends— or whatever it was he was doing. Trying to *impress* idiots—

And then fucking *Brad* is blurting out, 'I just don't fucking *get it*, ok? Faggots. I mean— *why?*'

'Oh *Jesus*,' he hears Adam mutter from somewhere outside of suddenly *cold* and *far too sober* hollow of his skull. *What?* Jesus, *what?* Has he done something to give himself away— are they gonna try and beat him up or something? Because he'll rip their fucking heads off if they even— '*Why* is it even any of your business?' Adam adds. 'I know you don't have a problem with lesbians— Brad, man, you really got to get over it.'

'Yeah, but dykes *make sense*,' Brad declares, drunkenly— and, actually, not all that threateningly. He blinks away the sudden— *fear*, or whatever that was— and realises that the tall guy seems pretty *wasted*. And still kinda friendly. Like this is a conversation you have with your pals. 'Who doesn't love pussy? *I* love pussy? Have I told you how much I *love* pussy?'

'Far too many times to count—' Adam replies. 'Don't start this shit. You'll make Hargrove think you're a weirdo.'

'If I could die face first in pussy I would die a happy man,' Brad declares. 'Sometimes I dream about it— just going out with a girl sitting on my face—'

'I'm sorry man,' Adam says, addressing *him*. 'He's had enough to drink that he'll start going on about *feet* next— and how much he wants Mrs. Wheeler to step on him or something. You just gotta try and ignore it—' the dark haired guy turns back to Brad. 'You, my man, my oldest and dearest friend, are a *loser* and a pervert and a *weirdo*—' and it's all said with absolute *affection*.

'A pervert and proud,' Brad raises his beer to the idea. 'Anyway, Mrs. Wheeler has really sexy feet. Even you can't deny that.'

'I can and I will,' replies Adam.

'Shut up about her,' he finds himself snapping. 'Karen's real *nice*.'

He sees Adam's brows twitch, but gets distracted by Brad sighing, sounding *disappointed*, 'You're right. She is a real nice lady— I can't

imagine her ever—'

Adam interrupts his friend, 'Yeah, we do not want to hear the end of that sentence.'

Silence falls, just for a moment, because then Brad's on about faggots again. 'I just don't get it. Pussy is *wonderful*— why the hell would you want to rub off against some other dude's hairy cock and sagging balls?'

'This coming from *you*—' Adam laughs. 'Dude, not everyone's into the same thing. I keep telling you to live and let live, it's not like it's hurting you—'

'Yeah, but what about my poor, virgin eyyyah!' the jock breaks off as his friend starts kicking at him, 'Jesus Adam! Fucking *stop!*'

'Do you think Hargrove wants to hear you go on about stupid shit that has *nothing to do with any of us!*' the dark haired guy snaps between kicks. 'Stop being so fucking *stupid.*'

'*Hargrove* is fucking *curious* now,' he says, sitting up, *looking* at them. What the fuck is all this about—? Seems too much of a coincidence they wanted to drag him out by the quarry to drink and so Brad could complain about fag— wow. He almost hesitated that time. *Faggots*—

'It's nothing man,' Adam insists, giving Brad what looks like a rather *threatening* look.

Brad's mouth opens, closes, opens again. A sullen look coming over that big, broad face, before the guy blows out a breath. 'Yeah man, *nothing*—' and then, because he knows he damn well doesn't look *convinced*, 'I just— I saw some—' hazel eyes flick to Adam's face and back to his, 'some *out of town* guys I think kinda— kinda flirting— ah — after a game once. Bugs me, is all—'

'*Bugs you*—' he repeats. Voice like lead. Thing is— he has no idea if the guy is lying or not, because if it's true, if Brad really did see some out of town guys flirting then it makes sense that he'd be all— *weird* about it. Because, as far as society is concerned, guys flirting is *weird*.

Wrong. *Disgusting*—

Huh. He feels kinda *sick*—

‘Not like—’ Brad blurts, obviously reading *something* into his tone, but probably not whatever was actually there. ‘Not like *beat them up* bugs me, like, I’d *never* do shit like that. That’s just— that’s *mean*, you know, but still— *bugs me*. It’s gross. You gotta think it’s gross too—’

What the fuck is he supposed to say to that? He’s feeling— he’s starting to feel kinda— *weird*. Floaty. Lines of pain staring to burn across his face— Fortunately Adam comes to his rescue. ‘I don’t know, the way you bitch about it almost tempts me to try kissing some dude—’

This starts Brad spluttering, ‘But— but— guys are hairy, and they *stink*— like, half the guys on the team don’t even wash their asscracks and they all smell of taint and sweaty balls and— and— gross man, gross. No Adam. No. No you *can’t*— you gotta be fucking with me— *what the hell kinda guy would you even—?*— Oh God, so *gross*—’

‘No hairier or stinkier than kissing some hippie chick with an unwashed cooch,’ Adam says, calm as anything— like this is something to be calm about. Just— just— talking about— *Jesus*— ‘Anyway. They’re not all like that— you ever smell Steve stinking like every inch of him hasn’t been scrubbed twice over and then slathered in some girly body lotion?’

As Brad starts whining that Adam can’t want to kiss Harrington, he just *can’t*, he finds himself remembering bottles on the shelves of Steve’s bathroom. The scent of the guy— that cologne, his hair products, and, yes, if he thinks about it probably *body lotion*— but at the same time *most* of him is imagining Adam actually doing it.

Kissing Steve.

Adam—

Dark hair, grey eyes, undeniably *good looks*— would he be gentle? Steve *needs* to be kissed gentle— eased into it. His eyes go to the dark haired guy’s long fingers, imagines them tangled in Steve’s hair— and

in his mind that brown hair is down, long, brushing those wide shoulders instead of swept up like usual—

Maybe Adam's already done it. Maybe he wasn't imagining shit, just — *projecting* or whatever his own— *feelings*— onto Steve. Maybe Steve is actually a faggot.

Maybe Adam is the guy he thought might be hanging around the brunet.

—

If he is—

How much of Steve has Adam seen, *touched*, ***kissed***— ?

Has he *fucked* him?

An image of the two of them together— Steve stretched out, head thrown back, Adam crawling up between his thighs, planting kisses across bare skin, across that big *dick*, crosses his mind— along with a burst of something that's part *arousal* but mostly *fury*.

A quiet *crack*. A sharp pain in his hand. Then wetness, a *burning*. The stink of cheap bourbon.

He must have tightened his grip, cracked the bottle— not enough to shatter it, but enough that he's not got glass in his hand and high-proof rotgut soaking into it to *sting*.

He stands before he realises he's going to do it, and a flick of the wrist sends the bottle winging out over the dark quarry to splash down somewhere in the middle of the water. His face hurts. His face *burns*— and it's not just his face. Lines of fire are flaring up all across his body—

He glances at the other two, sees them laughing, hears them praise the *good shot*, and *Damn Hargrove*, talk about a ***waste*** of sub-standard *liquor*— and—

He wants to *rip Adam's fucking head off*.

—
They'd look good together, that's the thing.

They'd look good—

And whatever Adam is the guy's—

A good guy.

He might even treat Steve *right*—

A tiny, reflexive movement towards the other two, fists clenching, *burning*. Everything feels kind of *stretched*. He feels—

—
It'd be so *easy*—

Jesus, get it together—

—
But then Brad— on the same fucking topic as before, dog with a Goddamn bone— is demanding to know if Adam really would kiss Steve if he had a chance—

And there's a pause, and his heart's in his throat, and—

And—

And—

The dark-haired guy's face wrinkles up as he considers the question, actually *serious* for once, before a shrug, 'I dunno. To piss you off, maybe, but would I actually go out there and find Steve Harrington and plant a big, wet one on him for no reason other than wanting to —' Adam trails off, face blank for a moment, before a tiny wrinkle of *distaste* appears between his brows. 'Yeah, probably *not*. Still rather kiss him than *you* though.'

He feels himself relax. That— that was *real* distaste. That wasn't the look of a guy imagining Steve's pretty coral lips and thinking *yes*— Still, he's feeling kinda— *pissed off*. 'This is the faggiest fucking conversation I think I've ever heard,' he snaps.

'*Dude*,' Brad whines. 'Uncool. It's not my fault Adam's fucking *twisted*. I like *girls*—'

'I'd say *the lady doth protest too much, methinks* —' Adam replies, '— but I've heard so many of your weird little fantasies I don't think I could convince anyone.'

'Oh, *ew*, **Adam**—' Brad whines. 'Don't even joke about—'

'You know what—?' he snaps, interrupting the guy. 'I think I'll head home now.'

'And now you've driven Hagrove away, great job Brad,' Adam chuckles, ignoring Brad's outraged declaration of *me?! and I'm not the one going on about kissing Harrington!* to say, 'Better wait a while first, man. Let your body burn off some of that bourbon.'

Jesus, not this again— 'This coming from a guy who's had—' he eyes the collection of empty cans around the other two. 'All *that*.'

'Yeah, but usually we stop an hour or so before we head home,' Adam replies with a shrug. 'This is supposed to be the part of the evening's entertainment when maybe I get a chance to pick the music, we sit back, I relax until the world stops spinning, Bradley here goes on and on about how Amy thinks he's a loser and won't tie herself down to him—' more outrage from the *Bradley* in question. 'So, you know, chill out man. Take it easy for a bit—'

He stares at the guy. 'You serious, man? After all—' he flails a hand at the two of them, hoping it somehow encompasses all of the *everything* of before. '*Jesus*, Adam.'

'Hah!' Brad crows. 'Hargrove didn't find your Harrington shit funny either!'

'Dudes, you both need to lighten up,' Adam says, shaking his head. The guy's *mocking* him. How the mighty have fallen, huh. Adam

should be *pissing* himself at the thought of pissing him off.

Fuck. He's becoming a total fucking *loser*.

He wishes he could get away from *himself* almost as much as he wants to get away from *them*.

He sticks his middle finger up at the pair and heads round to his baby's driver's side, getting in and slamming the door, speeding off with a spray of gravel that he hopes gets in both their eyes. Jesus. *Fuck them*.

Fuck them both.

He feels *sick*.

Sick and it's *their fault*.

Fucking—

His foot's like lead, his baby flying beneath him. He takes the corners hard, reckless, skidding across the road, just waiting to lose control.

But he doesn't.

He *can't*.

Hands too firm on the wheel, reflexes far, far, *far* too good— and he'd have to do it, actually let go, take his hands off, and if he did *that*.

That would be admitting it.

That would be *deliberate*.

So he makes it home in one piece— the home he shares with Max and Susan and fucking *Neil*— and it's still dark and quiet and his dad's car is still gone so he knows they're not even back yet.

He doesn't know if that's *good*.

If they were, if Neil was waiting for him—

He doubts he could stop himself picking a fight with the man. Not

right now.

Part of him *longs* to feel a face beneath his fists—

Feel a fist pummelling into *his own* face. Feel the *hurt* of it—

Would it even hurt?

It'd hardly be a *fair* fight, would it?

Not with— *what he's become*.

—

Fuck.

There was a moment there when he wanted to *kill* Adam.

—

—

Yeah. *Monster's* about right, isn't it?

—

Jesus.

Yeah. *Jesus*.

The thought of Adam touching Steve still sends shivers of *rage* through him— even though he's pretty sure the guy wouldn't actually want to do it. Wouldn't *lower himself* to kissing another guy. Wouldn't get himself *dirty* like that—

Fuck.

Fuck his life.

Fuck this entire fucking town may it burn in *hell*.

What a fucking *reminder* that the world's not kind to— to—

People like him.

All the fucking faggots and other *queers*.

He's a *queer*.

He may not be outright, all in all, a *faggot* but he's—

He's fucking—

—

—

Eventually the shaking stops and he straightens out of the hunch he'd sunk into, hands rising to wipe angrily at his face, trying not to acknowledge that they come away *wet*. Like fuck is he crying because of a pair of irrelevant fucking potato-faced *jocks*. Jesus.

Like hell is he—

With shaky hands he lights a new Gauloise as he slams his way out of his baby and stomps his way inside, heading straight for the fridge and one of his dad's beers before shutting himself in his room in case everyone shows up before he can get his game face back on.

—

Yeah.

Monster and loser and *queer*—

He takes a deep breath, sucking in smoke.

It makes him panic. He's a lot of things but he's not *dumb*— that feeling, or at least *part* of that feeling, a real fucking *relevant* part of that feeling right now— it's *panic*.

He does not want to fucking *panic*. He does not want to be fucking *anxious*—

Fuck this shit—

Fuck it—

Just—

He blows out the smoke, feeling loopy and light-headed. Part way to somewhere else—

But.

But—

Yeah. *Fuck this.*

So what if he's queer?

It's not exactly— *great*. But—

So what?

It's not like he wasn't fucking queer the first Goddamn day he set foot in this shithole town, yeah? It's not like he wasn't queer when Tommy H and all the nameless, faceless, *worthless* popular kids were trying to shove Steve's old crown on his head. It's not like he wasn't queer when all the everyone ever looked at him with stars in their eyes and a tingle in their junk.

Yeah. *Yeah—*

He may be a fucking *queer* but he's still *him*.

He's still him and like *fuck* is he *ever* going to let *anyone* look down on him for it. *Ever*.

—

He hopes.

—

But, *fake it 'till you make it, baby*. That's right, isn't it? You walk around, head held high, acting like you got your shit together and like you have *every right* to be doing whatever, to be treated *with respect*, and most of the idiots that don't think twice and don't live

their lives looking for a fight won't ever question it.

He'll be fine.

It'll be fine.

It has to be—

What about Max though? He doesn't think she's got anything against queers. Defends them, to *him* even if most of the time she's not brave enough to do it to *Neil*— and there's all that stuff about the little Byers kid—

Maybe it's different if it's *him* though?

Maybe—

He should— *Is* there any subtle way to ask someone what they *really* think of queers without giving away you're one yourself? Fuck knows.

He's gotta try though.

If she gets grossed out or something—

How's he gonna live with that?

—

He is not a pussy, not matter what his dad has said over the years, he is *not a pussy*— he can face up to it. Be a *man* about it.

Live with it.

Yeah.

He *can*—

Jesus. Fuck his life—

He sits in his room and smokes for a while, staring into oblivion, but he's too antsy to keep it up. It's like his bones are rattling. He wants to see Max— that's the dumb thing— he wants to see her and see

she's not disgusted by him and she— and fucking *Neil* and Susan are still out and—

After that he paces for a while, but he wants to *do* something, is almost *desperate* to do something. Anything.

Going out of his fucking mind.

Which may be why when his dad and Susan and Max stomp home with all the sounds of what must have been an *unhappy* dinner he's sitting on his bed, new beer in hand, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, looking for apartments in Susan's stupid copy of *The Hawkins Post*— or what there is of it, less than half as thick as it should be and with Wheeler or even fucking *Byers* names next to more than half the articles— Jesus *Christ*, Susan said something about them getting a new editor in from out of town— with all the authority of a woman whose ex-husband is still some low-ranked muckraker at a shitty paper back in Cali— and it can't come soon enough— he carefully doesn't think about why the Newspaper is as— not even short staffed, *unstaffed* as it is.

He puts the paper down in time for her to storm into his room, red faced— and that looks even *worse* with the stupid pink dress— Which apparently she agrees with, since she snarls, 'I hate this dress. This dress would look cute on *El*— *maybe*— but I am *not El* and I look like *puke* and Lucas and his family were there having dinner and he gave me this *look* and I hate Enzos and I *hate your dad*—' she flinches, realising what she just said, the two of them holding their breaths and staring at the door, counting heartbeats until it's obvious Neil isn't about to come in and chuck a tantrum.

'Yeah—' he says after a moment, relaxing. 'It is not a cute dress— but maybe Sinclair was looking at you because he has a thing for somebody's Auntie Pamela's tea cosy or some shit and was barely holding himself back from flinging himself lips first at you—' kid better *not*. Not in front of *Neil* at least.

'Who the fuck is Auntie Pamela?'

He shrugs. 'I dunno. The kind of woman who has a tea cosy that looks like that dress.'

She thinks about that for a minute. ‘But what’s a tea cosy?’

‘Stupid thing you put on a teapot to keep it warm. Like a sweater or something— who the fuck *cares?*’ at this point any motivation to suddenly blurt out a question about what she really think of queers has fucking flown the coop in favour of her whining about the dress and his dad and his dad deciding what everyone was going to order and how fucking *boring* it was because most of it was just Susan and Neil having some stilted conversation that seemed like it should have just been mundane and about nothing much but the two of them were seriously *tense* and everything seemed to have a double meaning.

After she’s done ranting she asks him what he was up to, whether he was just sulking in his room the entire time, and he tells her he went out drinking with Adam and Brad because that’s simple and easy and doesn’t include any of the fucking *bullshit*—

And this is when their luck runs out, because Neil comes storming in to shout at everyone about keeping him awake— though doesn’t raise his fists— and Max scuttles off, sticking her middle finger up at his dad behind the man’s back as she goes.

Neil looks at him then, disgust and disappointment and a whole bunch of *shit* in his gaze, before the man’s face scrunches up and he leaves, throwing the same old boring, derogatory bullshit about him being useless and lazy and *no kind of man* over his shoulder as he goes, and he—

He almost *laughs*.

It’s so fucking weird.

Of course there’s that *sting* there, but also—

If you only knew, old man.

38. Chapter 38

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For mentions of homophobia, domestic violence, and child abuse. Please let me know if I missed any.

Wow I am so tired. Chaos erupted, I exhausted myself and then managed to trigger some of my long standing health issues by exhausting myself. Yay me. So, not only was I even later than usual in replying to everyone, but this may not be the best chapter. I don't know. My internal quality controls seem to not working right now. I think everything makes sense but at the same time I doubt my judgement so... Anyway. Thank you all so much for sticking with this story, and for the comments and kudos! I hope you're all safe out there!

Max sleeps through again, or at least he thinks so. Or at least she didn't wake between going to bed and sometime around three or four when *he* finally drifted off properly.

He couldn't sleep before that. Kept thinking about— *things*.

This time when he wakes behind Steve's house he sits there for a moment, wondering if he should sneak back later and hide a packet of cigarettes out here. He'd kill for a smoke.

Almost makes him want to knock on the brunet's front door, see if the guy is feeling generous—

Probably best not to though.

Fucking *dreams*—

Would it be better or worse if he could remember what was dragging him out here? Assuming it is the dreams. Fuck knows—

He's pretty sure he's still dreaming of the Upside Down, has the sense

of a man— older. Grey hair. *Menacing*. Creeping around Steve's garden— but that makes no sense.

Nothing makes any sense.

Nothing.

—

It's not— It's not a *good day*.

Not really a *bad* one either. No shit from Neil. But not a good one.

At work Adam keeps trying to talk to him, but no way is he dealing with that right now so he does his best to avoid the guy— all in all not putting him in the best of moods. It feels like *cowardice*. Like *running away*.

He wonders if it's obvious, the reason he doesn't want to talk to the dark haired guy.

Wonders what Adam is thinking about him if it is.

Wonders if he's about to experience a queer bashing as the guy being bashed and not the guy looking for an excuse to pick a fight with the kind of guy who does the bashing.

That's all enough to worry about without worrying about anything else. But he is. Mainly *Neil*.

Because, yeah, ok, guy didn't go for him the night before or during the positively *icy* breakfast, but—

But.

By now Neil should have. He can't remember the last time his dad went so long without fists flying—

He should be relieved.

Should be.

He definitely shouldn't be worrying about it as much as he is.

But he knows his dad. Knows the man's *character*. By now Neil must be even more *furious* than the man is naturally. Spells trouble in the long run, he just knows it.

He's doing his best to make sure the man knows Max is off limits, that Chief Hopper will fucking come after him if anything happens to the guy's kid's best friend— but when his dad's in a *mood* it's not like common fucking *sense* has any fucking say, so—

Jesus he is *too young* to be so stressed.

Also, you know, there's the new thing he's currently trying not to think about. In this case the fact his clothes seem to be getting kinda *tight* and that mainly seems to be because he's putting on muscle like he's only ever *dreamed* of being able to do. Shit. He is going to have to lay off the weights for a bit or else he's gonna end up some *Conan the Barbarian* looking meathead.

And then, when he finally gets home, Max rings to ask if she can stay at the Byers' again— fine with him. *Great* even. Keeps her away from Neil— but then also goes on and on about how long it's been since he saw Steve and how he should come over to the brunet's house the next day for movies and *food* and—

'I've gotta work,' he tells her.

'Yeah, but *after*? Come on Billy, don't you *miss* Steve—' she must get something caught in her throat because she makes an awkward little coughing sound before finishing with '—s cooking? Don't tell my mom, but he is a *way better* cook than she is.'

And.

And.

And *oh God does he want to*, but—

But he is not up to really dealing with the *Steve* part of his recent revelations just yet. Or at least not the *face to face with a Steve that's probably not actually a fellow queer and would actually be completely and totally grossed out by him* part of the Steve part of his recent— yeah.

No way is Steve really, actually— wishful fucking thinking that.

No way is Steve actually going to still want to even just be his *friend* when the guy finds out.

No way will he get to see Steve all unguarded, hair down, wearing nothing but those skimpy little shorts—

Max's whining brings him back to reality. He clears his throat, readjusts the front of his jeans where the fly is digging into his sudden and kinda *unwanted* hardon, tunes back in to her going on about *why* he can't come around to Steve's after.

'I said I'd go drinking with Adam and Brad,' he tells her even though it's a total lie and he probably never wants to do that again.

She start carrying on about why he wants to spend time with two losers she's never even met before when he could be spending time with *Steve* but at that point he has to cut her off before he says something stupid, saying he'll tell her mom where she is and that he has to go now.

'Max is staying at the Byers' again,' he tells Susan— busy at work cleaning the kitchen, Neil off elsewhere again— on his way past.

He does his part, answers her questions— not that there are many— even manages a vaguely sympathetic noise when she complains about being left alone all the time, agrees that the two of them can just order a pizza as she's sick of cooking— but maybe she'll run herself a bubble bath first, because eating before hand always makes her feel a bit sick— and there he even manages to suggest she use that lavender bubble bath Max got her for her birthday— and they both agree and they both go their separate ways and he sees Susan shutting herself in the bathroom as he shuts his bedroom door behind himself and shoves a hand down his jeans.

Fucking *Steve*. Fucking stupid little blue shorts.

Nothing he can do about it, mind lingers on legs and neck and that *hair* and all that *skin* and even the bulge of the guy's *dick* pressing against the fabric and he comes hard and fast like a punch to the gut

—

He stands there, panting, hand still cupping his softening, cum slimy dick down the front of his pants.

Jesus fucking *Christ*.

That's some game he was playing with himself, pretending like he wasn't feeling what he was *obviously* feeling.

Jesus.

—

Fuck Steve is so *sexy* though. No guy should be that sexy— and it's *effortless* too, not like with Chelsea, trying too hard, Steve is just *naturally* sexy. Guy's got, like, *sex appeal*.

—

And then he's remembering *that night*. ***That that night***. The one before he, you know, *saw the light*—

Him naked. Steve barely more dressed. Waking up the next day with his own hardon pressed against the guy's thigh—

His dick twitches again.

Shit.

He had not wanted to think about that until now— still pretty much doesn't, because thinking about that means thinking about stuff he's pretty much sure he's never going to be allowed to have and that *pisses him off*.

—

He wishes he could remember more of what Steve was saying though, remember if it seemed like the brunet didn't mind so much being pawed at, maybe even seemed kind of into him too— But it's a blur. His head had been real fucked up then and there and what memory he does have sticking on the way the guy looked and smelt and *felt* in

his arms way more than what the guy was saying.

Steve hadn't tried to hit him or anything, he remembers that much—

—

He *thinks* Steve saying the words *fuck me* in amongst the rest of it are probably wishful thinking, some dream he hasn't wanted to acknowledge creeping its way in—

God. Wouldn't that be—

Fuck that's *hot*.

Coral lips forming those words, big brown eyes on him and no one else, that hair down and brushing those sexy shoulders—

He tries for a moment to ignore the way his dick's firming up again, but he can't— he gives his dick a tug, tells himself that it'd never happen, that Steve would *never let him*, but he can't help himself.

The brunet would be tight, all slicked up with proper lube— because you can't use Vaseline with a condom; that night with Mercy Haywood, her new white dress, the way she wouldn't speak to him again for weeks afterwards, and Jay laughing at the both of them like they were fucking *stupid*— and then explaining why the condom ripped so easy— taught him that— not that he'd need to use a condom. It's not like *Steve* could get pregnant— not that Mercy could either, where he'd stuck it— the two of them agreeing they didn't want even the *slightest* chance of him ending up on the wrong side of one of her dad's .45s and the two of them ending up tied together *forever*.

Even that thought isn't enough to soften him up when the other thought— the thought of Steve all wet and wanting— is lurking around in the background. *Jesus*.

A guy's ass can't be much different to a girl's, so he knows what it'd feel like, *inside*. He almost sinks to his knees at the thought, hand tugging at his dick, the other one going to his flies so he can get his jeans loose enough to play with his balls at the same time.

He comes again quick, still thinking about it, imagining how *good* it'd be, and *after* staggers over to sit on the edge of his bed and smoke a Gauloise, feeling kind of—

Weird.

—

Yeah, ok, it's— If he thinks about it too much the thought that he just jerked it to a guy still makes him kinda uncomfortable, but beyond that—

In all honesty he's never gotten why the girls he's done up the ass wanted it, or what they got out of it— He's pretty sure he got them off anyway, unless they're fucking *excellent* fakers, but if he thinks about it a girl is set up to be fucked, maybe not *there* but pretty close by, so maybe the same nerves or something are getting a workout— but a *guy*?

They do it though. Everyone knows that—

It can't all be putting out to please the guy on top, can it? Of course some girls are like that— don't care about getting theirs, just about keeping their guy— or the guy they're with— happy— which he never got either.

Like hell would he bother fucking if he wasn't getting something out of it. What's the fucking *point*?

—

For the first time in his whole Goddamn life he's actually thinking that he does not know enough about how fagg—

—

The word is *gay*, isn't it? The *nice* word.

—

— How *gay guys* fuck.

For a split second he tries imagining taking it up the ass himself—

He almost falls off the bed as every muscle tries to simultaneously lock up and propel his limbs in every different direction. He almost swallows the cigarette, spitting it damp and a little sad onto the floor before grabbing for it before it can set the carpet on fire—

Ok.

Ok.

O—K—

No. Nope. No way. That is not— That is not something he can even *begin* to contemplate right now.

Freaks him out.

It's enough having to admit he's kind of *gay*. A *bisexual*. Without thinking about— *that*.

—

—

Maybe one day—

Far far into the future—

—

Maybe *then* he can try thinking about it again, but not—

Not *now*.

—

Maybe if he jerked Steve off at the same time the guy would enjoy it

—

Jesus. Steve isn't— isn't—

Like, there's *no way* the guy actually is a fag— *gay*— or anything in

the first place, hasn't he already worked that out? Decided it? And even if he is—

Would a sexy little piece like Steve actually give *him* a shot?

—

Wow. Fucking— *self-esteem in the toilet, huh?*

Of fucking *course* Steve would give him a shot. Look at him, handsome as fuck, charming— *when he wants to be*— and he knows for damn sure he's a good fuck— and he'd treat Steve *right*. He would. He fucking *swears it*.

He ever gets the chance and he will treat Steve so good the brunet will never even *dream* of leaving him.

—

Not that he'll ever get a chance.

Steve's not—

And even if he *was*—

He actually acts on this bisexuality of his and he's gonna be raining hell down around his ears— from Neil, from jackoffs like Adam and Brad, from society in general—

Would it be worth it?

—

—

Why does some part of him just want to scream yes?

Also, *fuck society*.

Fuck all of it.

It's all *bullshit*.

Then Susan's calling out through the door that she'll order the pizza and what does he want and his come-sticky dick is still hanging out of his jeans. *Jesus.*

He and Susan watch some stupid, tragic, made-for-TV movie— him more staring at the wall and trying not to think too much about Steve again or risk a hardon in front of his step-mother, her drinking cheap white wine and looking like she's about to start crying— and eat their plain pepperoni pizza.

Neil doesn't come home. Again.

Susan doesn't bother with an excuse this time.

39. Chapter 39

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For themes of homophobia, a bit of sexism, domestic violence and child abuse, possibly kind of dub-conish powers related stuff depending how you look at it.

Sorry I didn't get back to everyone earlier. The excuse this time was that I was focusing as much as I could to getting Billy's timeline caught up with Steve's, which I have- hence longer chapter than usual. Next chapter should be from Steve's POV. He and Billy may even end up interacting- though that may be the chapter after. I just have a couple more scenes in mind first. Sorry. Though it just occurred to me that they kind of *do* interact in this chapter, even though neither of them realise it at the time. Though maybe saying that is spoilers. I don't know. Anyway, hope you all enjoy, and thank you for the comments and the kudos! I'll stop blithering on now so you can get on with the fic-

The next morning he wakes up *in Steve's backyard by the pool* instead of in the woods.

Jesus fucking *Christ*.

He is out of there as quick as he can manage, only stopping for the piss his body is screaming for when he's damn sure Steve hasn't seen him and isn't following.

—

For fuck's sake Hargrove, Jesus—

Neil still isn't back when he stumbles home, Susan sitting all alone at the dining table looking very much like the night before's *about to cry* turned to *actual crying* sometime since he last saw her.

She looks up at him but doesn't ask where he's been or accuse him of sleep-stalking unnecessarily gorgeous boys or anything, so he thinks it's gonna be ok— until she then says, 'He's cheating on me, isn't he?'

Well. *Shit*. Actual acknowledgement. Things really are falling apart, aren't they?

He shrugs. 'I don't know.' It's true, isn't it?

'Don't try to protect him,' she snaps, glaring.

'Do I fucking look like I'm trying to protect him?' he hisses back. 'I *don't know*. Not for sure— it's not like we're *close* or anything—' he sighs, '*Probably*, though,' and then, 'I would not be surprised.'

She looks at him for a moment, then nods. Gets up with a kind of brittle fragility and leaves the room, heading for her bedroom. He waits for a minute to see if he's needed for anything, but she doesn't reappear, so he gets ready for his day at the pool.

—

Then, all day, fucking *Adam* won't leave him alone. It's like the day before but *worse*. Every time he turns around there Adam is, wanting to *talk* to him.

It pisses him off. *Pisses him off*— and no amount of '*Fuck off Adam!*' seems to be getting through, so he's probably going to have to beat the guy up—

That'll set Brad and the others— the popular kids not so much friends with Tommy H and his group— *as if any of that fucking matters anymore, fucking losers*— against him. Meaning he'll probably end up the same social pariah as Steve did, with actual *cause* in his case— but like fuck he cares.

At least thinking about Adam— and how to show the guy he means business and get him to actually *fuck off* without accidentally *killing* the smug little shit— is thinking about something other than the fact Max is hanging out at Steve's today and how much he wishes he was there— he's almost forgotten what the brunet smells like— the exact tone of his voice— has started contemplating whether that extreme

sexiness is just his mind playing tricks, exaggerating the situation—

Though thinking about beating up Adam does edge a little too close again to thinking of Adam with *Steve* again— and if he does that then things might just edge a little too close to *committing homicide* instead of getting rid of a pest, so he has to be *careful*.

After work he has his shower early, gets dressed, then lurks in the shadows, Gauloise hanging out of his mouth, until everyone else is gone and it's just Adam and him— the dark haired guy obviously looking for him.

Then, when they're alone, he strikes, creeping up behind the guy and shoving him face first into the wall near the men's bathroom. 'What do you want, Larrimer?' he demands, forearm pressed firmly against the back of the guy's neck, *pinning him*.

'*Shit!*' Adam squeaks. 'Warn a guy—' the guy starts struggling, pushing against the grip he has on him and getting *nowhere*. 'Jesus you are *strong* Hargrove—'

He pushes a little harder, until Adam lets out a hiss of pain. 'Every time I turn around there you are, it's pissing me off. You get that? *Pissing me off*— Now, I don't know what you want from me, but if you're trying to recruit me for Hawkins' homophobic fucking *fag bashing* society then—' Jesus, he might as well come waltzing out the closet right in front of the guy—

'*No!*' Adam yelps, struggling a little harder. '*Fuck*. Hargrove I know shit got— *weird*— or something last time and I just wanted to make sure you knew we're not like that. *I'm* not like that, not a— a— a *bigot* or something— and *oh my God I can't believe I'm having this conversation*, but here we are, having this conversation. Um. *Yeah—*'

'*Why?*' it comes out *hissed*. His heart is in his throat. Lines are burning across his skin— *What does Adam know?*

There is a pause. A long pause. Then, very, very *carefully*, the dark-haired guy speaks. 'I know things are different in California—'

'In *California?*' he repeats, incredulous.

‘Yeah,’ Adam says, nodding frantically— you know, it’d barely take any more pressure and he could break the guy’s neck. Douse him in bourbon. Throw him in the quarry— *what is he thinking?* ‘Yeah. *California*. Things are different. People. Views, you know, everyone says it’s more—’ the guy thinks for a minute, ‘—well I’ve heard people call it *degenerate*, but I think what they’re getting at is more *permissive* or something. You know, *live and let live*— and that’s a philosophy I can get behind, you know, no point starting shit for people who mean you no harm— of course I’m not talking pedos and dog-fuckers and corpse— *you know*. Sickos. But—’ Adam sucks in a deep, satisfyingly *panicked* breath— and it must be real clear to the guy now exactly who has the power right now and exactly how *helpless* the dark-haired guy is in his grip— ‘Gays. I don’t have a problem with gays and I just didn’t want you— being as you’re— *from California*— with your— *obviously more progressive views*— thinking I do and deciding we can’t hang out or whatever—’

He thinks about this for a minute. Thinks about all the ways he could interpret the things Adam is obviously not saying— *from California*, yeah, ok— of course he is, but it’s obvious that’s not what the guy means— just like it’s obvious he’s somehow given himself away— *impulse*, the slightest more pressure— but he makes himself relax. It seems to him that Adam is saying that he’s worked out he’s a queer of some kind and is ok with it—

‘What about Brad?’ he snaps. ‘He share your— *Californian* views?’

Adam snorts, ‘He’s a bit more— *Indiana*. But he’s *not*— Really, he talks a lot of shit, *ugly* shit sometimes, but he’d *never*— He’s a *good* guy— and I’m not just saying that because he’s been my friend since *forever*. He’s a good guy. He *is*—’

‘Yeah, *real convincing*,’ he snorts, stepping away as Adam starts to turn around, resting his back against the bricks.

The dark-haired guy’s mouth opens, closes, opens again— ‘I can’t tell you why I know it for sure—’ he goes to interrupt, scoff, but Adam speaks over him. ‘It’s *personal*— not for me, but for— It’s— Um— about *someone else* with— ah— *Californian* views. Not the sort of thing you should just tell people without the person in question’s permission, you know? But Brad— maybe he talked some shit at first,

but once he got used to it— He was good, *is* good. Kind— and I know, I know he can be *trusted* with— yeah. Um—

‘It’s not *you*, is it?’ he asks before he can stop himself. Memories of nightmare fantasies of Adam and Steve clawing at the edges of his mind. ‘You’re not the— *Californian*?’ Fucking stupid fucking way to—

The guy snorts out a laugh. ‘Me?—’ then a contemplative little tilt to his head, before he shakes it. ‘No. I don’t think so— I mean if some guy offered to let me—’ he clears his throat, ‘—*go surfing*, maybe I’d give it a go, see what it’s like— but the thought by itself doesn’t *appeal*. Doesn’t gross me out exactly but just doesn’t— I mean. I’d rather— *go hiking*— out here in Indiana with some of the lovely ladies of the class of ’85.’

He stares at the guy. *He better not even think about— surfing— with Steve*, but aside from that— ‘You are a total fucking *weirdo*, you know that?’ What kind of guy is like *I’m not interested in guys, at all, but if one hit on me I’d consider— whatever surfing actually fucking means in Adam’s twisted little head. Kissing. Fucking?*

‘Yep,’ Adam says, looking fucking *proud*. ‘Better weird than *boring*. Anyway, *truce*? Or, like, *friends*?’

He barks out a laugh. ‘*Jesus*. Ok, you utter freak, *friends* or whatever —’,

—

Which is how he ends up drinking out by the quarry with Adam and, unfortunately, *Brad* after all.

Jesus.

Friends.

Actual *friends* friends, not *Steve*— object of his unrequited longing— friends. Like, a friend that is just a *guy*. A guy he doesn’t want to kiss or anything.

—

—
Fucking hell—

It has been a *while*.

—

Thankfully they steer clear of topics like Steve Harrington, and homosexuality, instead babbling on about shit he doesn't give a fuck about, tuning it out into the usual kind of background noise while he sips his beer and smokes his Gauloises— he'll need to get more of them soon. Maybe Candy will be there— he hasn't seen her since that — *weirdness*— between them. He vaguely wants to make sure she's ok — though mostly he doesn't care.

His attention only returns to his companions when Brad gets wasted enough that he starts going on about Amy— reminding him of what Adam had said last time.

It's even more pathetic and pining than the dark-haired guy had suggested, and by the end of it he knows way more shit than he knew before or *ever* wanted to know about Brad Dailey's kinks. *Jesus*.

He gets the vaguely creeped out sense that Brad was getting off on the idea of Amy going with *him* instead of Brad himself that time the tall jock was watching them all the party— fucking— *cuckolding*, isn't that? Or something? Why the fuck would he know? Or *care*?

Like, the whole idea is an absolute fucking *anathema* to him— the idea of finding it hot that someone else was touching, kissing, *fucking* his— *person*— The kind of shit that'd make him commit fucking *homicide*.

Just *imagine it*— someone else's hands all over those long legs, fingers in that brown hair, lips on— *dick* rubbing against—

—

He takes some deep, *deep* breaths, trying to ignore the lines of fire spreading across his flesh. Yeah. *Not a kink he shares*.

—

Though it does sound *hot*, the way Bred describes being pinned down and *ridden* by Amy— or not *Amy*, but— whole body turned over to Steve's pleasure— though he's not sure about the *being reduced to nothing more than an **object**, a dildo she can get off with* part of what makes it hot. More—

Fuck. He'd *love* to see Steve come—

Hottest fucking idea, *ever*.

—

He's going to end up jerking off again, isn't he? Thinking about—

—

Fucking Brad. He still does not like *Brad*. Adam— Adam is ok, but *Brad*—

The guy says something to make him think the big *potato's* gonna be a *threat* and—

Anyway, when he finally escapes back home he finds no Neil, *again*, and Susan sitting in the lounge room, so drunk that she can barely raise her head to look at him.

He has to help her to bed, finding himself making soft little shushing noises at her like he's a woman or someone decent like *Steve* while she cries sadly— the soft and kind of soggy tears of someone who has been crying off and on for at least a couple hours now— and keeps telling him *sorry*.

He gets the feeling it's about more than just the state she's in—

And he *wishes* it's enough to keep his hand out of his pants and his mind away from Steve— a sad and sorry— and more than a little soggy— stepmother should be, but—

But—

He comes imagining his hands massaging Steve's big dick, the brunet squirming and moaning and sighing and *coming*— just for him. Him *alone*.

He wakes up in Steve's back yard again. *Jesus*.

When he gets back home Susan is sad but composed, smiling at him with the merest twitch of her lips like she wants to but can't remember how her face works. He has breakfast with her for once— frozen waffles, hah— because he can't help the soul-deep cringe of something like sympathy he doesn't want to feel.

He still doesn't like her much.

He doesn't *want* to like her.

Of course Neil has returned once he gets back from an utterly uneventful day at the pool, by way of the Candy-less 7-11 for more Gauloises— no one drowned, no one really flirted, Adam wasn't even there to be all— *Adam*— Yeah. Boring.

His dad is back, like he never left. Though, for all Neil is acting like nothing's— *wrong*— it's obviously not extending to Susan. She's— *cold*. A strange, frosty *dignity* to her movements—

She is *pissed*.

He wonders how long it will take for Neil to notice.

He wonders what his dad will do when the old bastard does.

Then he gets sent to fetch Max, again, because his dad is still playing the *family man* kind of hypocrite and wants her around for dinner.

It's fucking *embarrassing*, again, but at least the Chief isn't here this time for him to have to lie to.

‘Neil?’ she asks as she climbs into his baby.

He nods. ‘Neil.’

‘Ass,’ she sighs, and then, ‘You coming tomorrow to help the Byers— and El and Hopper— move?’

He frowns at her. ‘The fuck are you talking about?’

‘The Byers are moving house tomorrow,’ she says, slowly, like he’s an idiot.

‘Since *when?*’

‘Since *ages*,’ she sighs. ‘I *told you*, like, *days ago*—’

‘No you didn’t,’ he’s sure he would have remembered.

‘Yes I did,’ she snaps. ‘Oh my God Billy you *never* listen to me—’

‘I listen to you *all the time Maxine*,’ he snaps back. ‘I listen to you no matter what totally *inane shit* you’re going on about, Jesus.’

‘I do *not* go on about *inane shit*. **You** go on about inane shit—’

And, yeah, maybe by the time they get back home they’re squabbling, but they both fall silent as they approach the house. Inside— Neil is a sullen presence sitting at the table, Susan still cold, her movements jerky as she serves dinner.

The air inside feels *thick*. Sullen. Leadен with all the not-good things under the surface.

It catches in his throat, makes him feel *sick*. Child Billy, long dead and buried he’d hoped, seems to be clawing at the coffin in the back of his mind— It’s like his parents, back in the day.

Fucking *freaks him out*.

He goes to his room as early as he can, even the thought of *Steve* not enough to stir his dick. Instead he does his weights, eyes on the door, wondering if tonight will be the night Neil finally *snaps* and goes for

his head.

It's not.

Still, he sleeps badly. Badly enough that he wakes in the woods in the dark, only part way to Steve's house, and manages to get back home long before the light. Which is good, because he's almost drifted off again when Max shows up in his room, shaking, tears rolling down her face, to climb into his bed again and huddle against him and it's like all their earlier squabbling becomes *nothing*.

As he strokes her hair and listens to her shuddering little sobs— no words this time, no explanation— he wonders if this is what it's like being a *parent*. Then wonders how the hell this has happened to him.

Then why he doesn't mind.

—

He drops her off at the Byers' early the next day after getting the Byers' new address off her, repeating, and then again, and again, that he has *work*—

'You *always* have work these days,' she sighs. 'Oh my God Billy— you're becoming *no fun*, seriously —' and then, a moment later, 'Steve will be there. You know how much he likes helping people.'

'That's because he's a *good guy*,' he says, carefully. Eying her. *What does that look mean?*

She rolls her eyes. 'I *know*. **Everyone** likes Steve—'

It suddenly occurs to him— 'Wheeler and Byers haven't been hanging around him, have they?' Better not have. Fucking— *making him unhappy*.

'Mike and Will?' she asks, face wrinkling uglily in confusion.

'No dipshit. *Wheeler* Wheeler and *Byers* Byers. The big ones.'

'Nancy and Jonathan?' she stares at him. 'No. They, like, *ignore him* most of the time. *Why?*'

Relief. 'No— no reason. Just curious,' he manages, but she's *looking* at him again and he doesn't think she buys it. At least she doesn't *say* anything though. Still— he doesn't *like* the idea of Steve being at the Byers' house with them where they can—

If they corner Steve and try to *touch* him he'll—

Do absolutely nothing because he won't know anything about it because he's been avoiding the brunet like a fucking coward.

The thought puts him in a bad mood for the rest of the day.

—

Adam invites him to yet *another* party at Brad's— and he's thinking of going, but when he gets home to get changed fucking *Neil* is still there, in an obvious *mood*, and demanding he bring Max home for dinner again. *Jesus*. His dad's even gone out and bought Susan a bunch of flowers at some point during the day— though a look at her is enough to tell she's unimpressed.

Go Susan. He wouldn't have thought she had that much backbone—

Still. *Worrying*.

Neil doesn't like it when people don't do what he expects. What he *wants*.

Few things piss his dad off more than people pissed off at him for *valid reasons*. Can't have that. In the old man's head he's fucking *perfect*. Goddamn *beyond reproach*.

—

So maybe he isn't expecting to be confronted with the sight of Steve heading out of the Byers'— much less *creepy*, even if it looks like it could use some work— big new house along with Squawky and said little Byers. Part of him's thinking that Chief Hopper's probably all over fixing the place or he could offer to lend a hand, make things nice for El and the little Byers kid, but the rest of him—

Fuck.

It's like a punch in the gut.

—

He finds his foot easing down on the breaks, slowing the car so he can get a proper look. *Steve looks tired*—

But, fuck, he wasn't kidding himself, was he? Wasn't making shit up. Exaggerating it. Steve is fucking *gorgeous*.

Dark eyes meet his for a second before the brunet looks away, all attention on ushering Squawky into the car. There's no waiting, welcoming smile. No nervous little wave. No—

His heart clunks in his chest.

It's—

It's *nothing*. Nothing. Steve probably hasn't realised it's him, that's all, or maybe the brunet is a bit sore about being ignored— but he can make that up to him. He *can*— yeah. Yeah— he just has to—

To—

Fucking man up and stop avoiding him.

—

But not tonight. Tonight he has to get Max and drag her back to what's shaping up to be an even more fucking *horrible* dinner than usual.

Feeling weirdly self-conscious— and like he wants to check and see if Steve's looking at him— he stomps up to the front door. It opens before he gets there, the Chief cocking a brow at him, 'Some other family engagement you forgot?'

He shrugs. 'I've been real forgetful since we moved to Hawkins. Must be all the fresh country air.'

The man just nods, a rueful look on his face, then bellows, 'Max! Your brother's here to get you.'

She comes scurrying out looking tired and relieved to see him, beginning to whine about Mike and El and Lucas and Squawky how *annoying* everyone is, *Oh my God*, the moment the car door shuts. Then, of course, ‘Neil?’

He nods. ‘He wants you there for dinner.’

‘This late?’ and ‘I already ate,’ she complains, and then, when he looks at her. ‘Pizza. It was ok. Not as good as something Steve would make— We should get him to make pizza. I bet he’s *great* at pizza—’

Ignoring that last part he tells her, ‘You’re going to have to eat more.’

‘I don’t want to eat more. I ate *too much* already—’ she whines.

‘Max!’ he snaps. ‘My dad’s in a mood and shit’s weird at the house, so do what you’ve got to do to avoid bringing it down on you, ok?’

She blows out a huffy breath. ‘Someone should eat *Neil*. Or *something*— I bet we could find something to eat Neil—’ she blinks, glances at him a little nervously. ‘Um. *I didn’t mean that?*’

‘Real convincing,’ he smiles, or kind of *grimace-smiles* at her. ‘It’s— God. Sometimes *I* wish something would eat him too, so, yeah. He’s a fucking *dick*.’

She gives him an awkwardly sympathetic little smile before they both fall silent. He can feel it here, in the car with them, how much neither of them want to be heading home right now.

—

The sad thing is that he’s had *worse* dinners with his dad— though this ranks up there pretty high with the worst of the ones with Neil *and* Susan— who is still, obviously, *undeniably* pissed. At least— not that it’s much of an *at least*— the old man’s responding irritation seems directed at his wife and not at *them*, but it’s still horrible.

Still freaking Max out.

Scaring her.

Pissing *him* off.

Like usual on nights like this they creep off to bed as soon as possible, leaving Neil sulkily watching his war films and Susan icily retreated to the bedroom with a book.

He does his weights then gets ready for bed, catching his own reflection in the mirror— Yeah. He really needs to cut back on all the exercise— he flexes, stretches, rubs a hand down his chest and belly, feeling the thick layer of *muscle* beneath. Fuck, every time he looks at himself recently it's like he's become more *built*. Jesus.

—

He looks good though, he can't deny that. Fucking *epic* hair, epic facial hair, real *man's* body— big hands and bulging muscle. The kind of body that'd look *good* next to Steve's taller, skinnier one. The brunet's darker hair and eyes contrasting his own blond, blue-eyedness the same as their bodies.

Yeah.

His hand goes back to his belly, sliding down over his abs— *Jesus does he have **real** cut **abs** now*, wow— and down to his dick. He looks at it in the mirror, cradled in his hand. It's not a bad dick, not as big as Steve's, but not a bad dick. Nothing to be ashamed of—

He kind of wants to show it to Steve— and then remembers he has. Steve has seen his dick— seen it *hard*. It throbs at the thought.

In the end he jerks off ruthlessly to the thought of Steve touching him, Steve looking all *impressed*, Steve red faced and with bitten lips

—

When he's done he wipes his hand on the t-shirt he was wearing earlier, collapsing back onto his bed to smoke a Gauloise and check the apartment rentals in *The Hawkins Post*. Nothing new. Nothing much at all—

Jesus. The new editor can't arrive soon enough.

He stubs the cigarette out in the overfilled ashtray on the nightstand

— he needs to clean that out— and lets himself doze off, idly wondering where he'll wake up. Sometimes he worries it'll be inside the Harrington house, then what'll he do?—

Somewhere between sleep and wakefulness things start to get *weird*. There's a faint, warm, *wet* presence over his dick, making it twitch and throb and swell once more, him raising a little closer to consciousness, reaching down, *cupping* it— and then **guilt**. Pervasive. *Invasive*. Coming from elsewhere, not from him.

And then he's in the locker room and he's got Steve pinned to the wall and he's saying cruel, *demeaning* shit, grinding up against the brunet's ass— **No**. No. *Don't*—

He gasps in a breath, lurching upwards in bed, awake again, shaking, feeling *weird* and guilty and *no*. No. He'd *never*.

Steve's too good—

Too good—

And for a moment it's like he's trapped in a whirl of fantasy, what he would do if he could just reach out, just *touch*— and it's sensation. A mouth against his, the feel of a tongue slipping over his fingers, silky skin beneath his hand, a warm mouth closing over the head of his dick, the wrinkled little furl of a hole beneath his touch—

And he's so tired. *So tired*. And it's easy to fall backwards, to slip under where it's all soft and warm and heavy, and it *is* heavy, a weight pressing him down, a long, slender body on top of his, soft, smooth skin beneath his hands. He thrust upwards, groping at the flesh beneath his hands, pulling at the pyjama pants hiding Steve's dick from him, until it's free. Free and rubbing against his own.

His own rubbing against it. Touching it. Touching *Steve*—

When he comes it's brutal enough to wake him properly, to jolt him all the way out of sleep. *What?* He feels kind of dizzy and lost and disorientated.

He breathes, flinching when he's sure for a moment that he can *smell* Steve— The smell, if there is any, dissipates like the warmth he's sure

he can feel soaked into his skin.

Jesus Christ, getting a bit pathetic there, hey Billy-boy?

He sits up, switching on the light and fishing out a Gauloise from the pack on the nightstand. He feels weird. *Weird*. Real fucking **weird**—though even to himself he can't quite describe weird in what way.

He thinks part of it is the bit of the dream where he was real *mean* to Steve, because he doesn't want to be mean to Steve, especially not like *that*, makes him feel like— Wow. Yeah. Ok. Makes him feel like a *bad guy*, even thinking about it. Even having some stupid little wet dream about it.

He is getting *majorly* sentimental or something.

The rest of it is probably just actually *remembering* one of his dreams for once, because he *can*, he can remember every dirty moment of it — not that it was *that* dirty. If he was actually in control, *lucid dreaming* or whatever it's called, that dream would have been utterly fucking *filthy*, instead of just a bit raunchy.

Still— he's grown used to waking to the vague *sense* of whatever he was dreaming about, something that might as well be the memory of a memory of a memory of the Upside Down. The knowledge he was dreaming about it but no real memory of *what* he was dreaming other than faint impressions.

He doesn't think he's been having wet dreams. He doesn't think he's been dreaming about what's in Steve's little blue shorts and that's what's been propelling him across town every night. When he wakes up in the woods, in Steve's *yard*, he feels *different* than he feels right now.

Right now he feels like he's had a— admittedly not entirely satisfying — *fuck*. Nerves still kind of buzzing. That sleepy lassitude along with — embarrassingly— the vague sense he'd kinda like to be holding someone right now.

When he's done with the smoke he butts it out in the ashtray, hissing when ash from the *entirely too many other cigarettes* in it spills out

onto the nightstand. Fuckit. He'll worry about it tomorrow.

He flicks off the light and settles down so he's comfortable, waiting for sleep. It doesn't come for a long time, and when it does it's deep, *empty*, a delightfully *restful* void.

40. Chapter 40

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for hints of dysfunctional family dynamics/child abuse, an oblique mention of fear of homophobic reprisal, and mentions of possible sexual interest from a guy going back to when Steve was underage. Please let me know if I missed any.

So. Firstly we are back with Steve. Secondly no Billy and Steve interacting in person. Yet. But there will be Billy really, really soon. We are on the day when they interact. I'm aiming for next chapter. Anyway, thank you all for sticking with me to this point, and thanks for the comments and kudos that let me know you're still enjoying this story!

He drinks his morning coffee out by the pool, smoking one of his mom's God awful Gauloises— he'd actually crept into her room to steal another pack from her nightstand, the smell of her perfume— stale now, it's been so long since she was home— making him self conscious and guilty.

The smoke smells like Billy now— still horrible, but like Billy—

The blue of the water seems to call to him, eyes caught on it—

—

'Steve? Is everything alright?'

He glances up, frowning, then feeling a blush rise. *Richie Lewis*, standing in front of him looking all concerned. He glances down at the cigarette, sees it's burned down to the butt—Who knows how long the guy's been there.

A flash of the night before, of trying to get off, of trying to think about this man before giving up, about how much he *wants* Billy,

crosses his mind. 'Yeah, fine. Are you—?' he frowns. He can't remember organising for the guy to come around.

'Your dad rang me,' Richie Lewis says with a sort of apologetic half-shrug. 'He wants me to do some work around here.'

'Oh,' he glances down at his now cold cup of coffee, the butt of his cigarette. 'Do you want a coffee first?'

'Sure.'

Richie follows him inside, chattering away as he makes another pot of coffee. He plays his part, drawing on years of his mom's training to ask the right questions about how the man is doing— *good*— how his wife is doing— *also good*— the kids— *great! Kathy's going to start school next year*— the business— *really well, he's got Pete Cooper working for him now*, and then *though, of course, he's come around to do the work here himself since—* **Mr Harrington's**— *always been so supportive and, obviously, deserves his best work*— and then he asks what he's dad wants Richie to do. Which is apparently clean up the yard, tend to the trees, and put in a *sauna* of all—

He sighs. His dad is his dad. What does the man think, that his mom's going to let him drag the pretty young things home and get them all sweaty in the backyard? *Jesus dad.*

He ends up having to help the man get what seems like an *unnecessarily* long bit of wood out of the back of his truck— apparently it's stuck? And apparently that means he has to crawl into the truck bed on hands and knees and try and shift it while Richie *pulls* it from the end— don't ask him, this is, like, *not his area of expertise*— and all he can think is he wants more coffee and maybe another cigarette— when there's the sound of a throat clearing.

Kneeling up and glancing back reveals Robin standing there with a funny *look* on her face. A smile breaks over his face, 'Robin!'

'Stevie,' she replies, the *look* transferring solely to Richie, 'You two need any help with that?'

It's funny, Richie looks kind of— *weird*. Guilty, maybe. 'Um,' the man

manages, then ‘Ah, no, I think we just about loosened it up now—’ a tug and a twist and the piece of wood comes loose, Richie gesturing for him to get out of the truck bed before the man shifts the length so it’s balanced over his shoulder and heads towards the backyard with a ‘Thanks for the hand Steve.’

Now the *look* is directed at him. ‘You want a coffee?’ he offers, hoping it’ll make her *stop*.

‘Of course,’ she replies, like it’s obvious. It kind of is. Robin does *love* coffee— ‘Are there cookies? Please tell me there’s cookies—’

‘Peanut butter,’ he replies with.

‘Oh I am going to get so *fat* and it is going to be *all your fault*,’ she sighs happily.

‘I can stop making them if you’d like?’ he offers.

‘*Never!*’ She declares, slinging an arm around his shoulder and looking at him with way more seriousness than he thinks the situation warrants. ‘Promise me Stevie, hell or highwater or, you know, *evil Russians* and *eldritch monstrosities*, you must never stop making cookies—’ and then, in a fit of *something* she does a remarkably good Leia impression. ‘Help me Stevie Harrington, your cookies are my only hope.’

She’s staring deeply into his eyes, all seriousness. He can’t help it, he *snorts*, giggles escaping a moment later— she keeps up the serious façade for as long as she can, which isn’t long— her expression cracks, her own laughter getting loose.

It’s stupid, and not even that funny, but the laughter is such a relief he’s reluctant to stop, making stupid jokes that she returns with even stupider ones as he makes her coffee and serves up a couple of cookies, nibbling on one himself— not exactly a *healthy* breakfast, but, you know, it is *food*— which is probably a step up from his original plan of more coffee, another cigarette and a bunch of self-indulgent misery.

He invites her to come with him to the Hopper-Byers— which might

be presumptuous of him, but he can't imagine a world where Mrs Byers won't just, like, *love* Robin on sight. Nance should like her too — Robin's cool, amazingly cool, and like Nancy kind of different than the other girls— not that the other girls are all the same, but they're better at *fitting in* and both Nance and Robin don't really want to, he thinks, deep down.

'You're ok with just leaving him here?' she asks, which takes him a moment to understand.

'Richie?' She nods. He shrugs, 'I guess. Dad trusts him to do the work without being watched, so—'

'Yeah, but it doesn't, like, *make you uncomfortable* or anything, does it?' now she looks concerned for him.

He's not quite sure how to say that when it comes to what his dad wants him own personal comfort rarely has anything to do with it, so — 'It's fine. He's, yeah— he does good work?' Why did that come out as a question?

Why is she giving him that *look* again?

He needs a shower and to do his hair and everything before they can go, but the great thing about Robin is give her a TV and a VHS player or a Betamax player (or, in the case of his dad's obsession with having all the cool new toys he'll never use, *both*) as well as the collection of her weird movies that have somehow migrated to his den from her house and she's remarkably low maintenance. He has no worries she'll get bored or annoyed or angry with him or anything — in fact his only real worry is he won't be able to drag her away from the screen.

The shower is quick, shame returning, making it hard to linger under the comfort of the water. God— jerking off thinking about Billy. He hopes no one can see it on him—

He's almost finished with his hair when the phone rings. He trots over to his bedroom thinking Dustin, or maybe one of the other kids. Max— maybe something's wrong with Billy's car again and he'll have to drive the guy around—

‘Harrington residence, Steve here—’

‘Steven,’ he feels his stomach drop. The connection is bad, *really bad*, full of strange pops and crackles and this utterly *creepy* echo, but he’d recognise that voice anywhere, even though it’s been *years*.

‘Uncle Martin—’ he manages, only to be interrupted—

‘Put your mother on.’ It’s an order.

‘She’s not here—?’ he tries, and then, firming up his voice. ‘I can take a message if you want?’

‘Where is she?’ is the reply. ‘You must have the number, give it to me.’

‘I—’ he clears his throat. ‘I don’t. I don’t know where she is and I don’t have the number— Dad said something about the Hamptons—’

He hears a low sound of annoyance, then the words, ‘You really are useless, aren’t you? *Where* in the Hamptons? You must know something, even you’re not *that* stupid—’

It’s funny. It’s like something *snaps*. ‘You know what Uncle Martin?’ he hisses, ‘You can *fuck off*. Find her yourself.’ He slams down the receiver.

Oh shit.

He is going to be in *so much trouble* when his mom finds out.

The phone starts ringing again, making him jump backwards, heart in his throat. If he picks it up he is going to be— not even *yelled at*. Dressed down. Made to feel *small* and *stupid*— *smaller* and *stupider*—

And he should answer it, because he knows his mom has been worried about Uncle Martin— the man busy with work or something, not ringing as much these last couple of years— because his dad and Uncle Martin had a fight, like the fights his dad ends up having with *everyone*, and then Uncle Martin was banned from the house— actually, if he thinks about it, has the man rung at all?— He can’t remember his parents fighting about it— but that’s probably just

because the man has called his mom when his mom was somewhere else and Uncle Martin had the number. It's not like a man like Uncle Martin could just go *missing*— and obviously he's not missing, because he just called—

Oh wow he feels sick. Uncle Martin is—

He actually prefers his *dad's* company. Not by much, but—

The phone rings out— a moment later it starts up again. Oh God, what should he do?

The ringing stops.

It's like he can breathe again.

'*Jesus,*' he mutters to himself, feeling the way his body is trembling. Ok, ok, *big smile*, he'll just pretend that didn't happen.

He finishes his hair, checking himself over in the mirror and not liking what he sees. Hair's good, which is good, but there are shadows under his eyes and he thinks he looks thin and kind of *pasty* — but not like the kind of guy who jerks off thinking about guys who would not want a guy jerking off thinking about them.

He pastes on a smile— almost wincing at how good he is at faking it — and goes out to meet Robin. She looks up from the screen with a matching smile on her face, before frowning. 'Is everything ok?'

'What?' he blurts out. 'Why? Um— Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't it be?'

'You look kind of—' she shakes her head, a strange flash of guilt coming over her face. 'Nevermind. Yeah. Shall we go?'

He lets Richie know he's going out and then they pack into his car, Robin fiddling with the radio as he heads towards the Hendersons'. Then, all of a sudden, she says 'Richie Lewis is married right? To Sharon— *Anderson* wasn't it? Right? It's not like I imagined that, is it? And they have kids—'

He frowns, glancing at her, wondering what the hell she's thinking.

‘No, you didn’t imagine it. Highschool sweethearts—’ as Richie loves to say himself. It’s kind of annoying. Cloying. All too *American Dream*, like there’s nothing dark in the world.

‘And Sharon Lewis is like *super hot*, isn’t she?’ Robin asks.

He nods. That would be true, amber eyes, deep brown skin, pretty face, lovely smile, killer body, and on top of that a *wonderful personality*—

‘I just don’t get it,’ she sighs.

‘What?’ he asks, confused.

‘Not that you’re not, you know, *hot*—’ *what?* ‘just—’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ he ignores the little voice in the back of his head suggesting— *things*. No way. Just— *no*. Vanity, again, but—

‘He was looking at your ass,’ she says. *Flatly*.

‘What?’ Oh God.

‘When I got there. He was leaning back, staring at your ass— and he was getting a *really good look* with you on your hands and knees in the bed of his truck like that—’ she smirks at him and he feels his face *burn*. ‘—with a look on his face like— like—’

‘Like *what?*’ he squawks.

‘Like—’ her face scrunches up, and then she says, ‘—like he wanted to do that thing you told me Carol did to you— *you know*— with his *mouth*— and he had a hardon. I’m sure of it—’

‘How would you know what a hardon looks like?’ he squeaks. This conversation is getting *surreal*.

‘I may not be interested in touching one, but I’ve seen them,’ she says, and before he can demand *where* and whether *he needs to beat anyone up*, she’s adding, ‘I’m still in *high school*, remember, boys are popping them everywhere in the halls—’

‘I’m pretty sure they weren’t when I was there—’ he says, weakly. *Were they?* Oh God. Was he just *surrounded by hard dicks all the time?* He’s not sure how he feels about that—

His own had always been, for the most part, *obedient*. In that way at least. Less *random, out of nowhere* hardons in public, and more *hardons with provocation*— like with Tommy pressed against him. Or Billy existing in the same town as him. As long as no one he’s interested in is touching him or looking all *hot* nearby he’s usually ok — *Oh God, what if he’d actually gotten a hardon in the locker room showers with Billy pressing against him?*

Well, for one, he wouldn’t be here having this conversation— so that’s a plus.

‘They *were*,’ she insists, ‘You probably didn’t notice because they were attached to guys that aren’t your *type*.’

‘I probably didn’t notice because I don’t go around staring at other guys’ dicks—’ he snaps, feeling horribly self-conscious and for more than one reason. Billy— Richie Lewis. It’s *confusing*. ‘—Apparently *unlike you*. Seriously Robin, *what the hell?*’

‘Just because I’m not interested doesn’t mean I was never curious,’ she replies, flippant. ‘Anyway, aside the point. Richie Lewis was— it wasn’t even *looking*, he was outright *leering* at you—’

The main problem is that he *believes her*. It would be great if he could laugh it off— You know, all *What have you been smoking and why aren’t you sharing?* But. Yeah—

He thinks of Richie jerking off in his truck outside the house. Thinks of the way the man has always been almost *eager* to attract his attention, ask for help, *show off*. Shirt off in all sorts of weather—

He should be flattered right? Richie Lewis is— well, his good points haven’t changed since the night before, and he did used to have a crush on the guy, but—

Why can’t he just be a *guy* about? Excited at the chance to get his dick wet instead of kind of creeped out?

‘Don’t tell me that—’ he whines at her, trying to play it off like the news isn’t welcome but not like, you know, it’s as *unwelcome* as he finds it. ‘Dad’s hired him for some work, so he’ll be around the house all the time now and I’m going to be thinking— Anyway. You were probably wrong.’ Shit. He sounds as uncertain as he feels. ‘As you said, he’s *married*, and even if he wasn’t *why* would he be looking at *me*?—’ It’s going to be really pathetic if the answer to that is because he’s the only one *available*. Is he somehow sending out some bisexual signal that’s attracting the guy? Oh God. If he is he needs to work out how to not do that, like, *really soon*.

She looks at him for a moment, eyes roving over him in a way that frankly makes him kind of *uncomfortable*. It’s like she’s undressing him with her eyes, and not in a *sexy* way— more like she’s pricing up a piece of *meat*.

Eventually she says ‘I think you’re sexy,’ she says, which is just, like *so unfair* and kind of *outrageous* at this point— and maybe he gives her a *look* that suggests as much as he opens his mouth to tell her that ship has sailed onto an *ocean* of Billy— but she’s rushing to add, ‘Wow that came out wrong. I didn’t mean *I* think you’re sexy, or find you sexy— not that you’re not sexy, you’re just— you know— a *guy*. I meant— I think you, yourself, might be kind of sexy— or, at least, *guys* find you sexy— um. Maybe I should stop now?’

He stares at her for a moment before he forces his attention back to the road. He just— *Is she making fun of him?* Robin likes making fun of him— but the expression is wrong— *She can’t be serious though, can she?* Maybe she’s just trying to— *what?*

‘I—’ he begins, but then doesn’t know what to say, so—

—

Eventually, all the good manners his mother have trained into him rise to deal with the awkwardness, so he asks her about how her parents are. It comes out a bit formal, but she doesn’t seem to notice. She chatters away happily about these people he’ll probably never meet— because they’ll assume he’s her boyfriend and neither of them want to deal with the awkwardness of working out what to do about that.

Then Dustin's in the car and doing enough chattering for all of them, and all he has to think about is how to convince the kid to stop going on about Star Wars to Erica before someone snaps and murders the guy.

41. Chapter 41

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: I think only for mentions of dysfunctional/abusive family dynamics, but let me know if I missed any.

Finally we have Billy and Steve interacting again, wow, that took what feels like a very long forever. I hope you're all doing well, keeping safe, and keeping your spirits up. Life is amazingly surreal. Thank you all so much for reading, and the comments and kudos!

The Hopper-Byers' is in a state of chaos when they arrive. They're informed that Hopper had to go in to work by a Mrs Byers who seems to be trying to do three things at once. Nancy is there, chasing after her, going 'Joyce, *Joyce*, just hand me the— *Joyce*,' in a way that makes him think she's probably trying to take control of the situation.

Mrs Byers isn't exactly a perfectly *organised* person— it must be driving Nancy nuts. His ex-girlfriend is, yeah, the exact *opposite*. She smiles at him, Nancy, a little tightly, but it's still a smile, before her eyes flick over to Robin. The smile gets *artificial*. Nancy's *good manners* smile.

'You're Steve's girlfriend, aren't you? *Robin*? I think we met briefly in the mall parking lot—'

'Er.' Robin's nose wrinkles up. 'Um. Yes, *and no*. I *am* Robin, but I'm *not* Stevie's girlfriend.'

Nancy frowns, blinks, then that smile returns. 'Oh, I heard you were — um, so if you're *not*—?' She's curious, he can still *tell*.

'She's my best friend, Nance,' he tells her, then wonders if he should

have called her *Nancy*. Is “Nance” too familiar, with all the things they’re now not?

He can see Nancy doesn’t believe him— but also can’t work out why they’d lie about Robin being his girlfriend. Probably best to get away from her then, Nancy isn’t too keen on things she doesn’t understand and he’s not in the mood to have her trying to pick him apart right now—

He and Robin start off helping Dustin and Lucas— the latter sulking because Max isn’t here yet— carting boxes from the pile in the living room to the rooms they’re supposed to be in— but it seems like every time he returns to the living room Jonathan pops up and tries to talk to him. Which would be *fine*, good, *great* even, but the poor guy seems to have no idea what to say and keeps glancing at Will— helping Mrs Byers work out what pictures she wants in the room— and Will keeps glancing back, with a *stern* look on his face.

So. Yeah. Seems likely the kid has had a word with Jonathan about the fact he said something about the guy not liking him and now Jonathan is trying to do what Will wants and buddy up to him. It’s all forced and awkward and kind of terrible but he tries to ignore it, tries to be *friendly*, because Jonathan’s cool— not *hot*, not like Billy, but a cool guy. *Smart*. A better fit for Nance—

Except it’d not that long at all before he just *can’t bear it*— He doesn’t want Jonathan to feel like he has to be *nice* to him. It’s not real. It’s just—

And it’s not like he’s forgotten what he said to the guy, before Jonathan beat him up— and every time he catches even a glimpse of Mrs Byers it makes him feel guilty— and of course Jonathan could never really like him. How could he after— and—

Yeah. And then Nancy comes in the room and starts squinting at him and Robin, trying to work them out, so he makes a dignified retreat—

By which he means he abandons Robin to help Dustin in the new garage and goes and joins El and Mike in unpacking her room— and it’s not *cowardice*, not exactly, but he can’t help it if he knows neither Nancy nor Jonathan want to spend too much time in Mike’s

company. Kid's kind of a shit— a *bossy* shit— He's kind of like Nancy in a way— in as much as the two of them kind of have personalities that remind him of some of the absolutely *terrifying* women on most of Hawkins' committees and that do most of Hawkins' good deeds.

The two of them would run a mean charity drive— if they didn't kill each other first.

Also Mike and El are still kind of gross about each other— clingy currently, and prone to fits of uncoordinated young teen kissing and looking at each other like cross-eyed cows. Not what he really wants to be around either, but neither of them is his brother/kind of step-sister/possible future brother-in-law, so it's maybe a bit less icky for him. Maybe. It's still pretty icky—

They do kind of cut it out pretty quickly, though Mike's now looking thoroughly pissy and so much like his sister it kind of *hurts*. For a moment he misses her, misses the lie he was trying to sell himself— He had wanted to see a future for them. A house. Maybe *kids*—

Everything's going fine, *he's* fine—

'Steve?'

He looks up, smiles at El. She's standing there nervously, a piece of paper in her hands. 'Yeah?'

'Do you want to see a picture of my mom?'

Oh. It's not paper, it's a *photo*. 'Of course,' he says, taking it from her. Like pretty much everything that's happened when he hasn't been there in person he's heard about what happened to her mom, but isn't sure the details are right. The kids had been shouting over each other— Mike the loudest and most *offended*— and everything had kind of muddled into confusing tragedy.

He glances at the picture and feels everything lock up.

His head feels full, *strange*— a face that he almost thinks he knows, just for a second, staring up at him. From somewhere very far away he hears himself say, 'She looks very *kind*, like you.'

El makes a pleased little noise, taking the photo back and smiling down at it sadly. ‘She was— *is*— kind. I think.’

For a moment it’s like he can *feel* the hurt in her and he wants, really, really, really *wants* to do something to help, to *fix it*, but there’s nothing he can do. It makes him feel— weirdly *guilty*.

It’s sort of strange after that. A weird tenseness in the room that maybe he is the only one who can feel— the two kids seem fine, are acting perfectly normal, but his head feels heavy, leaden, and he could almost swear it was raining, a storm cracking over the sky, even though it’s clear and blue and the day is hot.

Then El needs help putting stuff on the top shelf of her closet— since her powers still haven’t come back— and as he takes the winter quilt from her their hands brush and it’s like a bomb goes off inside his skull.

—

The next thing he knows is shouting and pain. Everything’s confusing, his ears ringing, his thoughts airy and slow, so it takes him an embarrassingly long time to realise that he’s on the floor, slumped against the bed, Dustin, Robin and Will elbowing each other to be the one to check on him. ‘I’m the actual grown-up here!’ Robin is shouting.

‘No, you’re not! You’re not even out of high school!’ is Dustin’s reply to that.

It’s made even more confusing by the fact absolutely everyone else seems to be in the room as well, also shouting, and fussing over— ‘El?’ he manages.

‘Oh thank God!’ Dustin squawks. ‘Steve! Steve! Are you alright! You with us buddy?! You really need to stop getting knocked out, one of these days you’re going to wake up with brain damage—’

‘What happened?’ he asks as he tries to sit up properly, before sinking back with a hiss. Oh wow, he has a *headache*. It feels like a migraine or something— like when he woke up after Billy beat the shit out of

him. Fucking *awful*, it's like being a kid again and having Uncle Martin standing over him all disappointed while his temples throbbed and he tried not to vomit on the guy's shoes.

Fuck Uncle Martin.

His question prompts a bit more shouting, but not directed at him this time, before Dustin is telling him that, 'There was a bang and the whole house shook and we all came rushing up here and you were all on the floor and El has a nose bleed, so we're thinking her powers must be coming back and somehow she—' the kid wrinkles his nose, '— like, *zapped you*, or something. Because Mike's fine. Knocked on his ass but fine. And you don't look like you hit your head, but— What do you remember?'

'Dustin,' he whines, 'shut up. My head hurts.'

There's more shouting then— or maybe just *loud voices*— or maybe just *voices*. Everything seems loud. He squeezes his eyes shut and lets himself sort of list over until he's lying on the floor, covering his head with his arms.

Things remain painful and confusing, it all too hard to think— he's being pulled at, he thinks, pulled to his feet— even though the change in posture sends nauseating waves of pain through his head and makes the world whirl around him. 'Let's get him to the couch,' he thinks someone says.

'Down the stairs?' is that Lucas?

There's more voices but they're all happening at once and he doesn't have the energy to try and understand them. He feels warmth by his side, smells— 'Robin,' and then a moment later the awkward form of Jonathan on his other side.

Everything kind of lurches into blood red and black for a bit, and the next thing he knows El is peering at him, a smear of dried blood on her upper lip and tears running out of her eyes. 'I'm sorry,' she's whimpering. 'I didn't mean to— I'm so sorry Steve.'

'You didn't— *Not your fault* kid,' he manages, waving a hand towards

her uncoordinatedly to pet her on the shoulder. For some reason she doesn't look that comforted, but a moment later Dustin and Robin are both in his face again, Dustin demanding to know how he is, Robin petting his head gently and trying to get him to drink a glass of water. He pushes the glass away and squeezes his eyes shut, insisting 'I'm *fine*,' even though he's pretty sure he's *not*. What he needs is a couple of Percocet and a sleep—

'I think I should get him home,' he hears Robin say. Yes. Great idea. He wants to be home, where it's only him and her and he doesn't have to *try so hard* while his head is killing him. 'Stevie, is it ok if I drive the beemer? I'll be careful with it.'

'Of course,' he replies, reaching out and tangling their fingers.

She squeezes his hand, then lets it go to get a grip on his arm, 'Ok, up we get, big boy.'

A moment later he feels more hands on him, Jonathan again he thinks, and Dustin, then he's back on his feet, swaying as the world goes red and black again. 'Maybe you should stay here, he can lie down on our bed—' Mrs Byers suggests. 'I think someone should keep an eye on him.'

'I'll stay with him at his place,' Robin says. 'if he gets any worse I'll ring an ambulance—'

'Are you sure?' Mrs Byers asks.

'I'm fine,' he pipes up, trying to reassure everyone. 'It's just a headache— nowhere near as bad as that time Billy knocked me out —' not quite true, but—

'You *really* need to stop getting knocked out,' he hears Dustin repeat, sounding worried.

'I'm fine. I really am,' he insists.

'Ok, well fine or not, let's get you out to the car,' Robin says—

It's not— well. He's suddenly reminded that he's bigger than everyone in the house. Even Mike— who is shooting up like a

beanpole. A *skinny* beanpole. It would be great if he could just, you know, *walk* properly, but he can't seem to keep his balance— or remain entirely conscious— so it turns into a kind of collaborative effort to get him off the couch and to the front door—

Probably the same collaborative process that got him from El's room, down the stairs, and onto the couch— but he wasn't even *semi-conscious* for that one, and somehow being kind of awake makes the whole process worse and more stomach turning.

The door opens and he blinks at Max's startled face before blacking out again for a second at her *shriek* of 'BILLY!!!!!!'

A moment later he hears heavy footsteps thumping up the stairs, feels Robin and Jonathan? being pushed out of the way as a warm, *familiar* body crowds in close, holding him up. 'What the fuck happened?' he hears snarled as a warm, broad, calloused, *strong* hand pets at his face and head, rubbing over skin and hair in search of an injury.

There's yet more shouting, making his head *throb*, making it all too easy to sort of *wilt* against that strong— wow, so *strong*— body and let Billy hold him up. 'Did you get *bigger*?' he asks, blinking blearily at the blond. He seems kind of— even *musclier* than before? How is that possible?

But then El's somehow managed to force her way through the crowd to tell the guy that her powers seem to be coming back and that she hurt him somehow and now he's got a really bad headache. She sounds like she's going to cry again—'It's not her fault,' he mumbles against the blond's throat. 'Please Billy, make sure she knows it's not her fault.'

'Of course it's not her fucking *fault*,' Billy says in that tone that brooks no arguments. Billy has declared it and so it is. He relaxes against the other guy's certainty.

'I'm driving him home,' Robin says. 'So if you could just help him to the beemer—'

'How are you going to get him out of it when you get there?' Billy demands, arm tightening around him. 'No offence, but the lot of you

together seemed to be having trouble just getting him to the door.'

'I'm plenty strong,' Robin insists, and then, after a tiny pause, 'Anyway, Richie Lewis is back at his place doing— *something*. He can help.'

He feels Billy tense up. '*Richie*—' the guy murmurs. 'What the fuck is *he* doing at the Harringtons?'

'I didn't know you knew him?' Robin says with a funny tone in her voice. She sounds kind of *amused*. 'He's doing yard work for Stevie's dad.'

'Oh, I've *heard of him*,' Billy snaps, darkly, and he's wondering *what the fuck?* But then Billy is insisting to come along too, in case "*Richie* isn't there anymore."

'And how will you be getting back here to pick up your car?' Robin asks, still sounding *amused*.

'I'll *walk*,' Billy snaps. Shifting his grip on him, and then pretty much *carrying* him down the front steps. In fact he thinks Billy *could* carry him, just pick him up and—

More chatter starts up but he tunes it out, focusing on not being too much of a burden to a guy who seems like he wouldn't even notice if he suddenly gained ten pounds. Wow is Billy *strong*. Was Billy always this strong? If his head wasn't trying to split down the seams this would be doing funny things to him right now.

At the car things degenerate into an argument about exactly who is driving him home. *Robin* in Robin's opinion, *Billy* in Billy's— Robin seems to be winning, if only because she doesn't hesitate to shove her hand into his pocket and pull out his keys.

They then start squabbling again about whether Billy even needs to come with them— it's making his head *throb*. He whines, hunching down and burying his face against Billy's shoulder, hiding his eyes from the light and hoping like hell they'll both just *shut up*.

Thank God for Max. 'Ok!' she snaps, making him slit his eyes open in time to see her snatching the keys off Robin and unlocking the car.

‘Get him in the back seat then *you*,’ she hands the keys back to Robin, ‘drive him home—’ at Billy’s loud protests she adds, ‘Follow them in your car, that way you can get to the pool after you’ve helped him inside. Ok?’

With a bit more grumbling— especially in the face of Robin’s *triumph* — Billy agrees to the plan. The blond gets the backdoor of the car open and helps him inside, strong hands steadying him, touching him, gentle. ‘You’ll be ok,’ the guy says, and there’s something strange to it. Like it’s a *wish* more than a certainty. ‘Fuck, you’re gonna get yourself knocked silly one day and then where’ll we be?’

‘You will make sure El knows it’s not her fault?’ he says into the warm air between them as Billy leans over him to fasten his seatbelt.

‘For fuck’s sake Harrington,’ Billy breathes almost against the side of his face, and then, ‘*Steve*.’ The tone is weird. Weird like almost *affectionate*— ‘Keep your eyes shut. *Rest*. You’ll be fine. Don’t worry about anyone else, alright? *Jesus*.’

As the car door shuts he hears Billy doing what he wanted, repeating that it wasn’t El’s fault, and then Robin is getting in the car, starting it and pulling out from the curb. She’s muttering to herself. Quietly. Too quietly for him to understand. ‘You good?’ he asks her, and then, ‘Sorry about this—’

‘Don’t be sorry!’ she tells him. ‘Jesus Stevie, you scared the crap out of me for a moment there— It was like when the Russians dragged you into the room, you know, you *did not look good*. But you’re ok, right? And if you’re not—’ she takes a deep breath. ‘We will deal with it. Yeah?’

‘Mm,’ he mumbles, squeezing his eyes shut like Billy told him to do.

After a long moment he hears her speak again. Quietly. ‘I’m starting to think I really was wrong about him—’

‘Billy?’ he guesses, because as far as he knows she hasn’t declared any particular opinion about any other guys.

‘Yeah—’ she sighs. ‘But I don’t— Stevie I still don’t like him, and I’m

sorry about that. I don't think— He hasn't done *enough*, not with the things he *did* do— not enough to make me sure he's *safe*. He *hurt you* — I mean, maybe I wasn't there for it, and maybe I didn't *see* it, but everything I've heard— and I know he hasn't recently, but I also know he *broke Tommy H's face* the other day— and I'm not saying that prick didn't deserve it. He deserved it if anyone does— not that I think violence is ever the answer— except when it's against evil Russians and eldritch monstrosities of course— but I don't like the idea of Billy— you know, *doing shit like that*— what if he—?— and I just don't know what he *can* do that'll make me— and then him *ignoring you*, which I know has been upsetting you, even if you *won't say anything*— I just— I— Goddammit Stevie, I don't know what I'm supposed to *do*—'

The thing is— he has *no idea* what she's talking about and his head hurts too much for him to try and work it out, so he lets the blackness drag him down, falling into a light, nauseated, doze— being jolted into painful bursts of wakefulness every time the car goes over a bump or turns a corner.

*He's dreaming, or at least he thinks he is, about the smell of spilled wine, burnt food, the record skipping in the turntable, Uncle Martin shouting, voice **outraged**, his dad laughing, his mom cold, angry in the way she gets when she's got all her defences up, and in the background the soft sound of a woman crying—*

42. Chapter 42

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For domestic violence, violent child abuse, and attempted murder. Please let me know if I missed any.

PLEASE READ: I'm not sure if any of you reading this were reading the fics I was writing last year, but if you were you'll know my dog got very sick then- almost died actually- She's still not really well, though she's still with me, but she has been declining recently. I am not sure what is going to happen, or what impact this- and everything else going on- is ultimately going to have on my mental health. I do know that I have enjoyed writing this story and knowing that people are enjoying it, and I don't want to leave you all in the lurch. Also, I'm going to have to go back to Billy's POV and there'll be some more Steve-less chapters, just after we escaped last time. Sigh. So I've made the decision to use this time when nothing much else is happening, and we're all back in lockdown here as Covid rampages about in a "second wave" that I think is more accurately described as the "first wave" as the first wave we had was mainly returning travellers, to focus on getting the story to the point where Billy and Steve are actually together- romantically- before posting the next chapter. So there'll be a break now for maybe a month or two? considering the pace of my writing currently, and then the next time you see this story updated you can be assured that whatever annoying Billy alone stuff you have to get through to catch up with Steve's POV there will be Billy and Steve interactions afterwards. I think then I'll probably post twice a week, because if I post all at once some of you might miss the update. To be fully honest at that point I may have to have a bit of a hiatus as I'm kind

of- well. Anyway. I promise though that Billy and Steve will be together before I do. Thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and kudos!

He's being jolted again, lifted out of the car. He scrabbles at Billy's arms, clinging, for a second, just a split second, afraid he's going to fall— 'Yeah. I don't think he's going to be able to make it up all those stairs— Steve? Steve, you with me?'

'Billy?' Wow his eyes are *blue*. Pretty eyes. Long lashes—

A quirk of one darker brow, 'If I sling you over my shoulder—?'

'I'll puke down your back,' he answers, honestly.

A rueful smile, then, 'Ok. Bridal style it is—' which is the only warning he gets before he's scooped up into Billy's arms and the guy is actually *carrying him* up to the front door. He tries to focus his addled mind on how ridiculous they must look— he's still *taller* than Billy for Christ's sake— but it's pretty much impossible when the alternative is to guiltily enjoy the blond's strength.

It would be better if he didn't feel like hell— but if he didn't feel like hell it wouldn't be happening— Also he should probably be feeling bad about this right about now, but he's feeling too stupid to worry about things like that.

It's all just pain and how *strong* Billy is. Everything. His entire world —

Robin scurries past to open the front door, closing it behind them, then scurrying to catch up when Billy just keeps going, climbing the stairs way too easily for someone carrying a pretty much fully-grown guy. 'His room's—' he hears her begin.

'I know where it is,' the blond dismisses her.

'How?' she squawks.

Billy doesn't answer.

His enjoyment fades on the staircase, the jolt of the steps leaving him

feeling sick and sweaty and kind of cold and clammy. He swallows down bile—

‘You gonna puke Steve?’ the blond asks, looking down at him kind of *alarmed*.

‘Hopefully *not*,’ he answers, then, as Billy steps out onto the top landing, ‘Can we stop at my mom’s room before mine?’ *Percocet*.

Her door opens with a waft of stale *Jardins de Bagatelle* by Guerlain and the stink of Gauloises. It’s almost sterile, otherwise, his mom’s room— white, minimalist. *Harsh*. Not much furniture and everything very *neat*— It suddenly occurs to him that it’s weird, isn’t it? It’s probably weird.

His mom has three bedrooms in the house, this one— where she actually sleeps— the one she pretends is hers— very stylish, modern, open fireplace— then the softer, frilly, *feminine* one she pretends she shares with his father— all of it lie layered on lie and the layer you see depending on how *close* you really are to all of them.

Robin does the honours of fishing out the Percocet from the mess of scattered bullets in the drawer and putting them back. He swallows two dry. ‘Let’s get out of here before we all get in trouble,’ he says once the pills are back where they belong.

‘Good—’ Robin’s voice cracks, her eyes a little wide, skittering around the corners of the room, gaze lingering on the gun safe. She clears her throat. ‘Good idea.’

In his room Billy lays him down on the bed with a surprising amount of gentleness. He wants to curl up on his side, but *shoes*. So he toes at his right sneaker, trying to kick it off, before the blond grabs at his foot and pulls off the shoe, stripping off the other one before hesitating, leaning over him—

‘What?’ he asks, peering up at the guy through the haze of pain in his head.

The blond clears his throat, the word, ‘Jeans?’ escaping, voice sounding deep and gruff and kind of *cracked*.

‘Um—’ he glances down at himself, at the pants he has on, briefly thinks that *yes, he would be more comfortable if he wasn’t wearing them*, but then— ‘I can manage?’ it comes out weak. Uncertain. Still—

He really shouldn’t be letting the blond undress him.

The moment’s a kind of weird mirror of *that night*. The one when Billy turned into a monster and then turned up in his pool— But he’s even less in a state to really know what’s going on or keep control of things—

‘Don’t be—’ Billy begins, clears his throat, tries again, ‘Don’t be—’ and then gives up and just grabs for his waistband and he can’t help shudder, just a little, at the feeling of warm fingers brushing his belly as the blond quickly undoes his pants and starts pulling them down his legs—

It’s one of those confusing moment again, where he’s sure he’s misreading Billy’s *interest*, but— *but*— Blunt fingers seem to brush his skin when they don’t have to, seem to linger near thighs, behind knees, at the skin just above his socks—

A throat clears. They both startle. Billy leaping back like he’s been burned, the jeans slipping from his grip to land on the floor.

Robin.

She’s got yet another *look* on her face. ‘Ok, I think I can take it from here,’ she says, arms crossed over her chest.

‘Er—’ is all Billy manages, eyes very, very *wide*.

She uncrosses her arms to start flapping them at him, shooing the blond out of the room like she’s shooing a stray cat out of her yard. Billy could just resist, *ignore her*, and he half expects the guy to do that, but—

A moment later he’s alone, lying on his bed in t-shirt, briefs and socks, trying to catch his breath— Wow. *Ok*. Wow— Maybe things will make sense when the Percocet kicks in, because his head is still killing him, and his thinking is still slower than usual, and he’s *one hundred percent completely totally absolutely sure* Billy was not— You

know. Looking at him like he wanted to fuck him.

Yeah—

—

After a while he starts to doze off, vaguely wondering where Robin is.

That scruffy, skinny Billy is standing over the bed, looking down at him—

‘Well, he was right about Richie Lewis not being here,’ being huffed out in irritation as Robin breezes back into the room wakes him back up. ‘Dammit. You doing alright Stevie?’

‘Head hurts,’ he replies.

She makes a soft sound of sympathy, ‘You should probably try and sleep. You need anything first?’

‘A glass of water?’ he suggests, then tries to sit up, before collapsing back onto the bed with a groan, squeezing his eyes shut and just managing to suggest, ‘But I can get it for myself?’

‘Yeah, somehow I don’t think so,’ she replies. ‘Be right back with it—’ a pause and then, ‘I think I’ll read. Do you know where I left that book?’

‘What book?’ he squints up at her

‘You know, *that book?*’ she says, as if it helps.

He sighs. ‘Robin you’ve left, like, *eight* different books here in the last week—’ It’s like with the movies, piles of her *stuff* just seem to be migrating over all the time. ‘Whichever one it is it’s probably in the den.’

‘Be right back—’

He’s asleep before she gets back.

—

He feels fine the next morning, good as new, as if whatever it was

never even happened. And everything's fine. It's all *fine*— Except, of course, he then doesn't see Billy again for days. And it's—

It's *fine*.

He's fine—

He's fine for the rest of the day, when it seems like everyone *not-Billy* feels the need to ring him first thing to make sure he's ok— which actually makes him smile, for a bit. Until the *not-Billy* thing sinks in. He's fine when Dustin and Erica show up while he and Robin are lounging in the den and she's having what she calls a *Quintuple H Hangout*— wait, no, *that's redundant*— but *Quintuple H on its own sounds weird. Doesn't it sound weird Stevie?*— interrogating him about which actors he finds hot— *I don't know! Seriously. How can you tell what they're really like, you know? Like, at least half the time it's stuntmen actually doing the— No, I am not just attracted to violent psychos. Jesus Robin*— to start going on about him knocking himself out and how Billy is apparently *unnaturally strong*— or at least that's what Erica's *heard*— *So is he a zombie or what? Or is this some other Hawkins weirdness?*— Which means more *deflection*— and then start going on about how El has her powers back now.

He's fine on Tuesday, when Dustin, Mike, Lucas, Max, and El show up while he's cleaning the kitchen to carry on about the fact that apparently Will's got a *mullet* now, as well as a small set of weights, and was last seen *going for a run*— *This is because we didn't pay enough attention to him*, Mike insists, *We should have just played his stupid campaign*— He tries to convince them that it's ok, that Will is allowed to explore his identity, that it doesn't mean he's not *Will*, not their *friend* anymore— but they're too busy being obnoxiously dramatic about it.

At least eventually they stop, even if it's only for long enough for El to move a few things with her mind, smiling widely at him as she wipes up the blood and the other kids crow in satisfaction. Of course then it's back to whining about Will.

It's annoying.

Mike is especially annoying, but that's maybe only because he keeps

having the weirdest urge to take the boy aside and ask if everything's ok. Mike's *Mike*. He's never exactly ok, but as far as he can see there's nothing more wrong with him than usual other than this Will based freak out. Sometimes he does not understand himself.

He's fine on Wednesday, when Robin's busy with some friends from band and the phone won't stop ringing, but every time he picks it up no one's there— just that weird, creepy echo from Uncle Martin's phone call— until it drives him out of the house and he ends up spending the afternoon in the yard, helping Richie Lewis— who doesn't seem to be perving on him, but who knows— work out the best place for his dad's new sauna.

He's even fine on Thursday, when the kids seem to want him to drive them all over town as they desperately drag an amused Will to all their old hangouts— As if they're trying to convince him to return to his nerdy ways.

Kid looks good though. Mullet and tight jeans and muscle-t— Someone's basing their look on the best looking blond in town— And, while Will is still *Will*— A kid. Not *Billy*. He's getting a glimpse at a Will that'll probably have all the girls (and boys) panting after him.

At the diner, in the moments the other kids are distracted and not squawking at the kid, they share a *look*, kind of rueful on the kid's part, *acknowledging* on his— and then he buys Will another milkshake — which he hands over with an *I like the hair*— and gets everyone squawking again about *favouritism*.

Though, yeah, *again* he finds himself having to stop himself from asking Mike if he's ok. What the hell?

He's then fine through talking to Mrs Byers about getting Will a key to his place, pleased, though he tries not to show how pleased, that she doesn't think it's a dumb idea— as long as he's really ok with it. *Because you've done so much for those kids already Steve, so much, you will say something if they're being a nuisance, won't you? I don't like thinking we're taking advantage of you*— Which, of course they're not.

He *likes* being helpful. He even likes the kids, even though they can be absolute little *shits*.

She agrees that Will seems to need some space, and is he's happy letting the boy retreat to his place then, *At least we all know where he is, and he can get in a lot less trouble over at yours than I worry he will if he starts hanging around town by himself*— There had been a strange kind of *worry* in her eyes at that, and he doesn't know what to make of it, but in the end maybe it doesn't matter since they agreed he'd get the key made and drop it off on the weekend.

He's even fine that evening, after Robin's gone home after dinner and a truly *incomprehensible* movie he fell asleep halfway through. Fine as he showers to wash the sweat of a disgustingly *hot* summer day off, and blinks, and is sure, just for a moment that *Billy* is there, in the bathroom with him, *looking*— but not *Billy* Billy. That other, skinny, beardy Billy— but another blink and the guy's gone—

And he's going nuts—

He keeps seeing this other Billy. Sitting across from him at breakfast, staring at him in the bathroom, watching him when he lies down in bed— it's only for a split second each time. Only—

Fuck. He really must miss Billy, huh?

Yep. He is definitely going *nuts*—

But he's *fine*. Fine, fine, *fine* all the way until he crawls into bed.

—

The phone ringing wakes him up.

It's Uncle Martin. He's *sure of it*.

It *pisses him off*—

He climbs out of bed and stomps over to the phone, picking it up with a snapped, '*What?!*'

Nothing— no, not *nothing*, the sound of someone *breathing*— but

quick breaths, panicked and stuttering and— Wow, ok, he is absolutely *pathetic*, because he knows, just *knows* who it is, recognises the sound— ‘Billy?! What’s wrong?’

‘Ah,’ a tiny, crack of noise, then another breath, deep, shuddering—

‘Billy—?’ Shit. Something’s definitely—

‘He hit Max’ the blond’s voice sounds *broken*. ‘He hit Max and almost killed Susan.’

‘*What?! Max’s mom?!*’ he demands, and then, ‘Billy, where are you? Are you ok? What happened? Where’s *Max*?’

‘H-hospital,’ is stuttered out. ‘We’re—’ another deep, shuddering breath. ‘We’re at the hospital. They took Susan away— He *broke* her nose— Max’s— I mean, she hasn’t been seen yet, but you can fucking *tell* it’s broken—’ the blond trails off.

Oh *God*. ‘Your dad?’ he manages to bring himself to say. It makes him feel sick— but maybe he’s wrong, maybe—

He’s not wrong. ‘I’m going to kill him,’ Billy breathes down the line. ‘I was *going to* kill him— I was. Fuck. *Steve*—’ it’s so *plaintive*. Makes his chest hurt. His heart. ‘—Steve, I was coming apart. I was— I— and then I saw her. She was bleeding. *Bleeding*. Bleeding and crying and *Susan* was just lying there like he broke her— I think he *broke her* — and— I had to get her out of there, had to get them *safe*— safe. Hah! So I brought them here, but I can’t— *I can’t Steve*— I’m coming apart again. I’m coming apart and I’m going to go *kill him*, I know I am, and she *needs me* right now, so I need *you*. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry, but I need you to come here because if you don’t I’m going to go kill him and I need— I need—’ he breaks off into a kind of low, anguished, whine.

‘I’m on my way,’ he says, heart in his throat. Oh *God*, *Billy*— ‘Billy, I’m on my way, ok? Ok?’

A quiet, pained sound of affirmation.

‘Have you called Hopper?’ he asks, because— aside from the Billy maybe turning into a monster and killing his dad thing— this is a

police matter, this is fucking *attempted murder or something* and *child abuse*— Oh God, *Max*— **Max's mom**— and Hopper— Hopper is a *good guy*. He'll *fix it*. He'll make sure Neil Hargrove is *never, ever, ever* allowed near any of them again—

'I don't— I *can't* think— I don't remember—' Billy replies, sounding small, *scared*. 'I don't— and he *won't believe me*. Fucking pigs *never believe me*. They just take fucking *Neil's* side— drag me back there like it's *my* fault— and this time he'll say I did it, if he's in trouble he always says I did it— and he'll do his *war hero* act. Good fucking *patriotic* American— they're not even *his* medals Steve! Half of them are from the pawn shop and the other half were *Uncle Harrys*! Fucking *liar*— I should rip his fucking—'

A blurt of sound escapes him, that same old comforting hum. He wants to make it better, he wants so badly to make it *better*, to make it so Billy isn't hurting any more— He hears the blond sigh, almost *feels* him relax over the phone— 'I'll ring him,' he suggests, waiting for the protest that doesn't come. 'I'll ring him and explain everything. He won't blame you, he won't take your dad's side— I promise. Ok? I *promise*.'

A pause, and then, 'Ok,' and 'Then you're coming here, right?'

'*Right*.'

It's *so hard* to hang up the phone, but he has to, and then he has to take a deep, *very deep*, breath of his own before he dials the Hopper-Byers new number. It almost rings out, but then Jonathan answers, sounding half out of breath and kind of annoyed.

'Hello?! Who is this? It's— *do you know what time it is?*'

No. And he doesn't really care either. 'Jonathan I need you to get Hopper.'

'Steve?' the guy squawks. 'What the *hell*? What's going on? Is it—?' Great. It sounds like he's starting to panic.

'It's not the Upside Down or anything,' he rushes to reassure the guy. 'Just— *please get Hopper*. Ok?'

A moment later he hears what he thinks is Mrs Byers demanding to know if everything is ok. Then he hears Nancy. Then he hears Jonathan telling them it's him and that he wants to talk to Hopper—

'Why? What's happened?!' he hears Mrs Byers asking, before she snatches the receiver off her son and repeats the questions to him.

'I'll explain later,' he says. Maybe. Depends what Billy wants people to know, but they don't need to know that— 'Just— *Please* Mrs Byers, I really need to talk to Hop—'

The sound of the receiver being snatched again. 'Hopper here.'

'Billy's dad's really hurt Max's mom and hit *Max* and broke her nose and they're all at the hospital!' he blurts out, wincing at how *young* he sounds. Like he wants a grown up to deal with the situation. *Fix* it.

'**WHAT?**' Hopper roars, starting up a chattering of half heard questions in the background. *In a minute Joyce, a minute—* he hears the man say, before turning his attention back to the phone.

He repeats what he said, a bit slower this time, wincing at the way his voice shakes. Oh God. *He needs to get to Billy—*

When he's done there's a second's pause and then, 'They're at the hospital?' Hopper asks for confirmation.

He makes a noise of agreement— Oh wow. He thinks maybe he's about to start *crying*— can't have any of that. He has to be strong. Has to be— *Billy needs him.*

'Ok, I'm heading there now—'

'Wait!' he blurts, and then, at Hopper's demand of *what?* 'Um— Billy said his dad will act like it's his fault and—' how did the blond put it? '—Um— act like he's a war hero, even though he's not— and maybe show you some medals? But they're not *his* medals— and, um— Billy's dad hits him— you can ask the kids if you need proof— and— and— I know he beat me up and everything, but he's not— he wouldn't do that to *Max—*'

Hopper's voice is surprisingly gentle when he says, 'It's ok kid. I'm

not going to go leaping to conclusions. I've seen the guy with his sister— It's going to be ok, ok? I'll deal with it.'

'Ok,' he almost whispers back. 'Um. I'll see you at the hospital then?'

A pause, then. 'It's ok. *I'll* deal with it. You don't need to be there—'

He interrupts the man with '*Billy needs me.*'

Another pause, then, in an odd tone, 'Billy—'

'*Needs me,*' he reiterates.

After a moment, 'Huh,' and then, soft and strangely contemplative Hopper adds, 'Ok— I'll— uh— I'll see you soon.'

43. Chapter 43

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For dysfunctional family relationships, domestic/family violence, internalised victim blaming, please let me know if I missed any.

Hi everyone, long time no see. I'm sorry to everyone who left a comment in the last month, I haven't been checking that inbox so I missed them all until today. I had a bit of writer's block on this story, so it took longer than I predicted, but I've succeeded in writing ahead to the point Steve and Billy get together. I'll be posting about twice a week until I reach that point- I'm aiming for once over the weekend and once mid week- and then this fic will be going on hiatus. I'm not sure when, or if, I'll be writing any more- I'm sorry to say I feel a bit burned out on this story right now. Still, I cannot express how much appreciate everyone who's stuck with it this far, thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and kudos!

He does not wake anywhere near Steve's house. Instead he wakes up in *his own Goddamn bed*. It's fucking *freaky*.

It makes him feel like something's *wrong*— which is kind of fucked up, since you'd think waking up in your own bed instead of in the woods— or out by the hottest guy in town's pool— would be the exact opposite— Hah. Maybe you can get used to *anything*.

He's feeling kind of— *off*, because of it. And then, he goes looking for Max and breakfast and finds fucking Neil and Susan, and has his dad *tell* him that they're all spending the day together.

He has *work*. Max, apparently, is due at the Byers— but Neil is unreasonable.

In the end he thinks it's Susan's chilly insistence that she thought her husband was the type of man always to *honour a promise* that gets his

dad to let up— but only after the man *stands over him* while he rings the pool and has to beg for the morning off. *Beg*. And he does even get *Adam*— no, he gets their fucking ass of a supervisor and pretty much has to *humiliate* himself and then listen to the guy go on and on and *on* about responsibility and *letting the team down*.

Fuck the team. With as many hours as he's been working recently he is basically the entire fucking team *himself*— and maybe Adam. *He and Adam* are the fucking *team*.

It means he is in a *foul* mood.

But, then, *Neil* is in a foul mood, so is Susan, and of course *Max*— Max who wants to be helping El and little Byers unpack, not stuck with— and it is *stuck*. They're all stuck with Neil.

He feels it like he never has before. Him and Max but also *Susan*—

It's his dad. His dad is the *problem*.

You know, back before Uncle Harry he used to think it was *him*—

Even *after*, even though he could remember the man's more often not drunken ramblings about how Neil was always that way, born *bad*, that he was a *good kid* and *don't let your dad tell you otherwise Billy, you gotta be strong, men like that live to tear everyone around them down— you just gotta remember it's him, it's always been him, Neil was born with the Goddamn devil in him*— there's always been this little bit of him, somewhere, a little bit he does his fucking *best* to ignore— that tells him that Neil's fine. That *he's* the problem, that if he could just change, be different, be *good* his dad would—

But that voice has been mighty quiet since the night he escaped the Mind Flayer, quiet in a way he's only just noticed.

Yeah. Neil's the fucking *problem*.

He wonders if the old man can feel it, their *resentment*, as they all sit down in silence and eat Susan's rubbery pancakes— and he knows, he just *knows* Max is thinking about Steve's cooking too, and how it has never, *never*, not once, not since the defeat of the Mind Flayer, felt like this when it was them and Steve. Hah.

He feels more at home, more safe, more like what it's supposed to feel like with *family* when he's with the brunet, with Max, with Erica, even with every single one of the shitty kids and *Robin* than he does sitting at the table with his own *father*.

After the torturously silent breakfast Neil decides they're all going to the Big Buy, all going shopping together as a family, all of them helping out his wife— a woman who is all but flinching away from him in *disgust* the moment he gets close— with her wifely chores.

He almost tells his dad to go fuck himself, that it's *him* that's done most of the shopping recently, that it's *his* fucking money that's been keeping them fed since Susan's been so busy with work and whatever it is that keeps *her* out of the house. Dread probably.

They must look— Jesus, he has *no idea* what they must look like as they pile out of his dad's car and into the supermarket. Half fucking *crazy* probably— Susan still playing the Ice Queen, Neil looking fucking *twitchy* with barely suppressed rage, Max in a sulk, him—

Yeah. He fucking *hates* being passenger in a car when the driver and the person in the driver's seat are fighting. Even if Susan and Neil weren't *fighting* fighting, no fists being thrown. At least it was *her* driving. Fuck. His dad driving him anywhere makes him feel—

Sick.

And, on top of that, he's stuck hoping his dad's not about to pull a *scene* in the supermarket.

Fuck. Fuck his life— What if he looks afraid? What if all the people going about their day can see—? Jesus. *Keep it together Hargrove*. He just hopes like hell he doesn't look too much like he's wondering what Neil will do when he snaps and how he's gonna get Max out of there, because that's what he's thinking.

Every now and then a line of fire burns across his flesh— his face usually, right across the bridge of his nose. ***Keep it together Hargrove.***

Somehow he manages not to completely lose his shit and turn into a

many legged fucking *monstrosity*, but it's hard and he hates it, hates everything to do with his dad, hates the way the man makes him feel *sick*, and by the time Susan's done he's about ready to grab Max and run, but instead he grabs most of the groceries and starts marching them out to the car—

And there's Tommy fucking *H*, getting out of a black benz, face still looking a bit fucked up. The guy freezes when he spots him, going even paler behind those freckles. A moment later Carol is climbing out of the car, looking at him just as warily as her fucking boyfriend.

It's a standoff then. Them staring at him, him— well, ok, *maybe* he's glaring back, but fuck. He *hates* that guy. Hates him.

Just *looking* at him is making his ugly fucking *voice* echo in his head, “—*his knees for*—” is making his imagination conjure up all sorts of shit that makes him want to punch the whole *universe* in the throat.

Just thinking about it, picturing Wheeler and Byers *sharing* Steve, makes him—

Fuck. He could *kill* Tommy H. for ever putting the idea in his head.

‘You gonna go over there and beat his head in or can we leave?’ Max whines at his elbow.

‘What?’ he snaps.

‘You look—’ her nose wrinkles up. ‘What did that guy even *do* to you to make you look at him like that? You look like *old Billy*— maybe not even old Billy. Maybe like some new and unimproved *psycho* version of you.’

He glances at her. She looks kind of worried. *Shit*. He turns away from Tommy H. and Carol and focusses on getting to the car, saying softly, half hoping she won't hear, ‘He was talking shit about Steve.’

‘*Oh*,’ she says, scurrying to catch up and help him load the groceries into the boot. ‘That *dick*. You really should skip out on the pool and come help today— Steve will be there and you haven't hung out with him in *way too long*. I think he misses you.’

‘Did he say that?’ slips out before he can catch it.

A little pause. ‘No—’ something sinks in his chest, fluttering back upwards when she adds, ‘—but he’s always very interested when I talk about you. And sometimes I think he looks *sad*.’

Sad.

Steve is not supposed to look *sad*.

Before he can ask for more details about Steve’s possible sorrow Neil and Susan reach the car. Her face cold and remote. His fucking *murderous*.

Max mutters something underneath her breath and stomps over to the car, slamming the door after she climbs in. He follows, depositing the groceries in the back before climbing in the other side. Susan goes to get in the driver’s side— and she’s not a great driver, but her behind the wheel is a million times better for his blood pressure than — his dad stops her.

A frosty little argument ensues, spoken in whispers neither he nor Max can hear from inside the car, and then *Neil* climbs into the driver’s seat and Susan gets into the passenger seat, slamming her own door behind her.

For a moment he doesn’t think he can do it. Everything gets real *slow*, his body, those lines, those *scars* start *burning*, and it even seems like a good idea, how fucked is that? A *good idea* to turn into a fucking *monster* and go tearing out of the car and far, far a-fucking-way from his dad.

A small, warm, *strong* weight lands on his arm. He blinks open eyes he didn’t know were shut, glances at Max to see her giving him a look of—

It’s not *pity*, and that makes it ok. Sympathy he thinks.

He can do this. He can—

He just *keeps breathing* as his dad speeds recklessly through the streets towards home, focussing on Max’s hand on his arm, on *anything* other

than the fact they're all in Neil's power right now.

It's such a fucking *relief* to get away after helping Susan unload the groceries, to pack Max and himself into his baby and speed off in the direction of the new Byers place. They don't say anything. He doesn't know about her but he feels like he's been awake for three days or something, just lived through some great battle, is still alive when the dust is settling and has no idea what to do with himself.

Fuck. This shit with Susan and Neil better fucking *resolve* itself or things are going to get *messy*.

When he pulls up in front of the Byers' house he turns off the car, glancing over at her to say, 'See if you can stay the night or something. I don't think either of us needs to be home right now.'

She thinks for a moment, frowning. 'She'll be ok, won't she? My mom?' He doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know *what will happen*. After a moment she adds, 'I guess you don't know any more than I do. God. I *hate* your dad.'

'Yeah—' he sighs. No point saying it though, really. It doesn't change anything—

Though maybe it's enough to have someone who understands how he feels. Who *knows*.

She stops with her hand on the door, giving him another one of her *looks*, 'I'll say hello to Steve for you, yeah?'

He hesitates— 'Yeah.' Wow. That came out kinda— *Weak*.

She nods and gets out, trotting off towards the front door while he watches to make sure she gets inside safe. It really does seem like it could be a nice house, this one. He can imagine El and little Byers hanging out in the garden when it's fixed up— and there seems to be plenty of room out the back— and thinking about it gives him none of that dread he's used to feeling if he thinks of the Byers place.

Probably just because of what he did to Steve in their old house.

Jesus—

He really wishes he never did that.

—

He— It's like being struck by lightning. The door swings open before she can lift a hand to ring the bell, and he's up and out of the car before his mind consciously acknowledges what he's seeing.

He can hear her scream for him, Max, see Steve reeling at the sound — *Steve*. It's like his heart is beating with the other guy's name as his legs eat up the space between them, as he pushes Robin and bigger Byers out of the way to take the brunet's weight.

44. Chapter 44

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For Billy's general Billy-ness, homophobic language, misogynistic language, mentions of domestic violence, opioid use, please let me know if I missed any.

Here's the next bit! I hope you're all doing well, or as well as any of us are doing right now. Thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and kudos!

Steve wilts against him, barely half-conscious. Is he hurt? Is he— his hand goes to the brunet's head, looking for an injury, looking for a *reason*. Nothing. Furious, the words 'What the fuck happened?' snarl out of his mouth.

Everyone tries to answer at once, but since they're making *no fucking sense* they're no fucking *help*. 'Did you get bigger?' Steve breathes against his neck and that's— That's *something*.

It almost makes him miss what El's saying, her telling him her powers are back and she somehow hurt Steve. He can't believe it— *El hurt Steve*. Subconsciously he tightens his grip, just a little, on the brunet.

She doesn't look like she meant it. She looks like she's about to start crying, has been crying— *Shit*. He's about to say something to reassure her, but Steve's insisting he make sure she knows it's not her fault, because of course he is, Steve's such a *good guy*. 'Of course it's not her fucking *fault*,' he snaps, eying everyone in case he has to correct any stupidity. As he does he feels Steve relax against him—

Jesus.

Just—

—

The moment is ruined when Robin decides she's got the right to be

driving Steve home, and ruined further when he tries to reason with her regarding the fact that he's the only one in sight even remotely strong enough to help the brunet get there and she tells him *Richie Lewis* is hanging around the Harrington house.

He knows that name. *Remembers* that name— Tommy fucking H's ugly little voice wheedling about the guy, making it sound like— Making it sound like *something* that's for sure. Not the kind of something he wants Steve anywhere near. Then to be told this *Richie Lewis* is doing yard work for Steve's dad— *pisses him off*.

Pisses him off further that Robin's got a point about how he'll get back if he drives Steve home in the beemer. '*I'll walk*,' he snaps, hoping he doesn't sound anywhere as— whatever it is— as he feels.

Fuck them— or at least the not El, not little Byers— also, not Mrs Byers— them. He starts off towards the burgundy car, taking Steve's weight easily. Thank fuck for his fucking unnatural muscles, yeah.

Jesus Steve smells *good*, that same cologne as always, warm and sweet and dry and welcoming. He wishes it was just the two of them, none of this fucking *squawking* from the peanut gallery—

Fucking *Robin*. She doesn't let up. Jesus Christ. Arguing with him about her right to drive "*Stevie*" home— that pisses him off too, right now. Why isn't *he* allowed to call the brunet that?— He reminds himself that it wasn't that long ago he was calling the guy *Harrington*.

Then she sticks her Goddamn hand in the guy's Goddamn pocket.

Fuck.

Ok, to get his keys, but—

—

Fuck.

She's a dyke. She's a dyke, he reminds himself. But what if she isn't? What if she's actually—

No. No. That was a quick in and out, no lingering to feel Steve up.

Still, it makes him a bit more *vicious* with her when they resume their argument about exactly who is going to be driving Steve home. *Him*, of course. Except she has the keys— and then she's going on about how he doesn't even need to come with them.

As if.

Steve lets out this pained little whine, cringing against him, and he's just about to snarl at Robin for being unreasonable and not taking her friend's needs into consideration when suddenly Max is there, snatching the keys and acting like she has the right to tell people what to do. Like *hell* is he just getting Steve in the car and letting Robin drive away with him.

He discovers that one unfortunate side effect of their increasing whatever it is lately, *closeness*, is that she's not scared of him anymore. No amount of snarling and calling her *Maxine* and insisting that he be the one to take Steve home seems to even *dent* her confidence. Rolling her eyes she adds, 'Follow them in your car, that way you can get to the pool after you've helped him inside. Ok?'

It's a good plan. He does not want it to be a good plan.

Making sure everyone knows exactly how *displeased* he is that they all seem to think they know better than him when it comes to Steve he gets the car door open and starts the process of easing the brunet inside.

Fuck. He looks *terrible*. Pale and tense— he can almost *feel* the pain radiating off the guy. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck— What if this is serious?

'You'll be ok,' he tells Steve, not sure he really believes it. 'Fuck, you're gonna get yourself knocked silly one day and then where'll we be?' The thought makes lines of fire flash across his face. *No*. Steve will be fine— it's just a headache. His mom used to get migraines and she'd get like this—

Used to piss off his dad so much. Her not able to do what he wanted when he wanted her to because lights/noise/motion might make her vomit.

He pushes away the feelings thinking about it give him, focussing on Steve, leaning over the brunet to fasten the guy's seatbelt. He's warm. Jesus he smells *good*—

'You will make sure El knows it's not her fault?' Steve says, squinting at him painfully.

'*Steve,*' It's exasperating. Why did no one tell him what a good guy Steve is when he first came to town? Jesus. So *sweet*. Fucking *migraine* or whatever and he's still— 'Keep your eyes shut. *Rest*. You'll be fine. Don't worry about anyone else, alright? *Jesus.*'

Wow, their faces are really close right now, he could just—

No. That would be—

Yeah.

He retreats, and turns to face the amassed hoard of shitty kids, Robin, Byers and Wheeler Sr., and Mrs Byers. Shit. El looks so *unhappy*—

He does as the brunet asked as he shuts the car door, making sure the girl knows it was an accident, knows *Steve* knows it was an accident, then—

Well. Robin's in the driver's seat of the beemer so he'd better—

A lingering glance at Steve huddled up in the backseat of the car before he stalks off to his baby. Max scurries to his side. 'He'll be fine,' she says, almost convincingly. He glances at her. 'He'll be *fine*,' she repeats. 'Steve's tough. He'll be fine.'

'He better be,' he snaps. If he's not he'll—

He has no idea. Go on a monstrous *rampage* probably and get shot or captured by the military. Ha ha fucking *ha*.

She grabs his arm, he glances at her— she looks so *serious*. So grown up. Fuck, she is growing up. So fast too— '*He'll be fine*,' she repeats.

He nods, short and sharp, then climbs into his baby and starts her up, all but tailgating the beemer all the way to the Harrington house.

Hah, no truck out the front. Seems he was right and Richie fucking Lewis has fucked off already.

What was she going to do if he hadn't come too? No way is she strong enough on her own to get Steve anywhere without them both getting hurt when she and big Byers couldn't even manage it together. Especially since Steve's out of it, fast asleep by the time he stalks over to the beemer to help Robin assess the situation.

The brunet doesn't even stir when they get the back door of the car open— which would be worrying, but his breathing is even and he's not pale or anything, just seems to be asleep. He and Robin glance at each other and then back at Steve.

'How is he?' he asks her.

She sighs. 'He fell asleep pretty quickly. I think he has one hell of a headache.'

He glances at the house, 'There's a lot of stairs in there.'

She nods 'Maybe if we both hold him up—'

'I can carry him,' he tells her, and then, '*I can*,' at her mildly disbelieving look.

'He is not short,' she points out. 'Not to offend your delicate masculinity, but he's actually, you know, *taller than you*.'

'So what?' he snaps. 'I'm *strong*.'

A pause, and then. 'Actually, yeah. I can see that. Wow, have you been doing anything other than working out all this time you've been MIA?'

He ignores her, leaning into the car over Steve and unbuckling the brunet's seatbelt— feeling the guy's breath waft against his face— fucking pretty coral lips and oh God. Yeah. Keep it together, he's *unconscious*, don't be a fucking sleaze.

Jesus Christ. *Get the poor guy inside so he can rest properly*. He hesitates — Ok. Yeah, he was touching Steve before, yeah? It's all fine.

Carefully he gets a grip on the brunet and lifts him out of the car, steadying him on his feet when he wakes and startles and flails weakly a bit before the guy gives up and just leans against him. He glances at Robin, ‘Yeah. I don’t think he’s going to be able to make it up all those stairs— Steve? Steve, you with me?’

‘Billy?’ soft, sleep roughened little voice. Fuck. Ok. Focus on the business at hand. How should he go about carrying the guy? Seems kind of— *something* to carry him into the house like a new bride. Fireman carry’s probably less dubious.

‘If I sling you over my shoulder—?’

‘I’ll puke down your back,’ the guy says, sounding comfortably lucid — if in a whole lot of pain.

Hah. ‘Ok. Bridal style it is—’ he says readjusting his grip on the brunet and swinging him back into his arms. Jesus he has gotten *strong*. Steve’s not a small guy— not huge, not *built*, but he’s not short and there’s a decent amount of muscle there. Not so much *lifting* muscle as *swimming* and maybe *running* muscle— actually, he feels a bit thin. A bit bony around narrow hips and ribs and those wide shoulders. Has the brunet been eating enough?

Now is not the time.

God he smells good.

Robin rushes to unlock the front door as he carries Steve towards the house, then inside— hah. He’s almost missed this place. Hah. *It smells the same*. Like the kids and like Steve but not like anyone else. No strangers’ perfumes or colognes. A deep purr of something satisfied starts up in his chest.

Partway up the stairs Robin starts telling him where Steve’s room is, and he enjoys the way she squawks when he tells her he already knows where it is. He doesn’t add that he’s been in there before. That he was naked. That he spent the night in Steve’s *bed*—

Not that. You know. *But*—

Steve saw his dick. Steve’s body *touched it*—

—

Jesus he has become one hell of a creep sometime he wasn't looking, yeah?

Whatever he might feel about that, what it means about him, he's soon more preoccupied by the fact the brunet doesn't seem to be doing so good on the bumpy ride up the stairs. 'You gonna puke Steve?' He tries to readjust his hold, to be *gentler*, smoother on the climb.

'Hopefully *not*,' the brunet whimpers, worryingly, but then he's stepping onto the landing so that should be better.

Before being taken to his room Steve wants to stop at his mom's, which means he ends up standing in the most *Godawful* creepy bedroom he thinks he's ever been in, while Robin fishes through a drawer full of loose bullets and pill bottles for the one housing the *Percocet*.

There is no window. No decoration. Everything is *white*. There's barely any furniture aside from a fucking *huge* gun safe and a bed that looks like something from an *institution*— not a wrinkle, not a crease, pin-perfect *Hospital corners*— a *thick stack* of journals and xeroxed articles on the bedside tables with titles he can barely understand— things about *psychometry* and *neural processing* and *heritability* and *recessive traits* and *genomes* and *DNA* and *evolution* and *selective processes* and arguments about *eugenics* in amongst the easier to understand article titles about *learning disabilities* and *dyslexia*— And it all *stinks* of stale cigarettes and strident, over-applied perfume, and—

It is a relief to get out of there. What the fuck?

What the fuck?

How is that Steve's mom's room?

It makes Steve's ugly bedroom appear almost *homely*.

He lays the brunet down carefully on the bed feeling kind of— He is trying to keep his head in the here and now and not, you know,

completely lose his fucking shit— and it does help that Steve's so obviously in pain— but the whole thing is real *intimate* and he knows, just fucking *knows* that he's gonna end up with his hand on his dick sometime later thinking about how this could go if things were different.

Wow he really is a creep—

Not only is he a creep but *holy hell* how did he manage to avoid acknowledging his amazing lack of straightness before now? Now he has it's like whatever level of fag— *fuck*. That really is a nasty word, isn't it? He doesn't want it applied to him, even by *himself*, so he's really gotta stop using it all together.

Yeah. Anyway. The stuff with Steve seems to have just supercharged his underlying *homosexual* tendencies. *Bisexual*. But homosexual in Steve's case. Guy's not a chick—

The guy in question seems to be trying to toe off his shoe to get comfortable and he's just standing there, being a fucking *pervert*. He catches Steve's foot, carefully removing the sneaker, then grabs Steve's other foot and does the same and then he's thinking about if there's a way to make the brunet any more comfortable when his eyes catch on denim and he thinks *jeans* and it feels like his head's going to blow off.

Jeans.

Steve's *dick*.

Jesus.

He thinks he says something, he thinks Steve replies, but none of it makes it through the rush of blood in his ears. It's like the sea. For a moment he's on the beach and his mom's there but then he's back and the backs of his hands are brushing the soft, hairy skin of Steve's belly as he undoes the guy's fly, as he starts to pull the denim down—

He really is a *sexy little piece*. Nice legs. Firm muscles— he can't help himself. He can't *stop* himself. He lets himself *touch*, just a little, as he gets the jeans down, as he *exposes* all that skin to his own eyes—

Steve makes a tiny noise, so small he doesn't even know if the brunet realises it, and his eyes flicker to Steve's face and—

A throat clears. A throat clears and he jumps away, scalded, hand in the fucking *cookie jar*. Robin. Of-fucking-course.

If it wasn't for— but— you see— yeah— *anyway*, he lets her shoo him out of the room, Steve's body warmth lingering in the flesh of his palms.

She marches him out of the house and he follows, *dazed*, blood still rushing, body *tingling*, and he almost drifts on past her to his baby but she grabs him by the upper arm and drags him to a stop. 'What the fuck—?' he begins— He can't think. He can't stop right now. He has to—

'You know you're a *dick*, right?' she snaps at him. 'I was seriously thinking I'd just let it go— for Stevie— but then you just—' she sighs, giving him a filthy look. 'Where *the fuck* have you been? Why have you been avoiding him? He might not say anything but I *know* it upset him. *You* upset him.'

It gets his attention enough to snap 'I wasn't *avoiding him*' even though he totally was. Not because of *Steve* though. God, does she have to do this *right now*.

Everything's golden and glowing and perfect and she's just. She's *ruining it*.

'Yeah, *right*,' she actually rolls her eyes at him. 'Did you finally actually get sick of hanging out with the *loser brigade*?'

'He is *not* a loser,' he reiterates. 'Jesus, let it go Robin, before I really start to think you think *you're* better than him.'

'Don't fucking *deflect*,' she hisses at him, and he finds himself stepping back instinctively. It's— Wow, ok. Out of character. Yeah. 'He's really been *hurting*,' she continues with, 'And I know part of it's *my fault*, but most of it's *yours*.'

'What do you mean *hurting*?' he snarls. No. Steve's been fine. Steve's always fine. Steve's a little golden ray of sunshine in this fucked up,

shitty world. He glares at her ‘*What did you do?*’

She makes a high, strangled sound of frustration then slumps, looking at him with something like defeat. ‘I fucked up,’ she says, flatly. ‘I said something stupid— *stupidly*—’ she tries again, ‘I said something in a really stupid way and I know he misinterpreted it and now I can’t convince him I didn’t mean what he thinks I meant because he doesn’t want to talk about it.’

He stares at her. ‘That sounds real fucking stupid. *Apologize to him, Jesus.*’

‘It’s not that *simple*,’ she snaps. ‘Anyway, as I said, he would not be at all as upset as he is if it wasn’t for you—’ *what does that even mean?* Great, now she’s *looking* at him. She sighs, ‘You do know I want to think better of you, don’t you? Then you go do things like this—’

Patronizing little bitch part of him hisses, even though he knows Steve would hate him for the thought— not just Steve, but *Max*. Jesus, it’s ok to hate a chick and say he hates her, but Max hates it when *anyone* with a dick calls a girl a *bitch* and is quite happy to bitch herself blue in the face about it—

Then her words really sink in. ‘You keep saying I’ve done something to hurt him, but I’ve not been around, I’ve not seen him or spoken to him in—’ he trails off. Trying to count the days and cringing as the number gets higher.

‘*Exactly*,’ she snaps. ‘You *matter* to him—’

‘What the hell’s that supposed to mean?’ What’s she insinuating? What does she *know*—

He bites down the panic. Fuck. *NO*. What does it matter what a dyke like her knows? What anyone knows? It’s ok. It’s fine. He’s fine. *No one* is going to make him ashamed of who he is, swear to God.

He thinks maybe she mutters *Goddammit* under her breath before her expression firms up and she *tells* him, ‘I can’t believe I’m about to say this, to *you* of all people, but at this point I don’t think I even care if you hit me or something. *Pull your head out of your ass and treat him*

*better, or else I'll make sure he **never** wants to talk to you again.'*

'I'm not going to *hit you*,' he snaps, outraged. What the fuck gave her *that idea*.

'Oh my God I do not care!' she— not quite *shrieks*, but not far off— in frustration. 'Stop being a dick to Steve. Stop *avoiding* him— or I'll make your life a *living hell*.' At that she whirls around and marches herself back into the house, slamming the front door behind herself.

He stares after her for a moment, mind skittering away from the idea of Steve being *hurt*, Steve being hurt because of *him*, then shakes it all off, heads back to his baby while fishing a Gauloise out of his pocket and lighting up.

Behind the wheel he pauses for a moment, staring blankly at nothing, at the street, at the houses, before he starts the car and pulls away from the curb, heading out, out, out into the forest instead of into town and to the pool like he's supposed to.

Alone, where he's parked before, he stops the car and stares at nothing for a moment before it all comes rushing back and he's spat in his palm and got that hand down his jeans and is tugging on his dick hard and fast. In his memory he sees Steve, Steve on the bed, the way the brunet had *looked* at him—

Fuuuckkkk—

After wiping up with his spare t-shirt he sits and smokes for a while, still not letting himself think about what hurting Steve means when he's got *nicer* things to think about. Anyway, he can make it up. He *can*. He can be real *sweet* when he wants to.

And he wants to. Boy does he want to—

See, he's not a vain man— fuck that. Of course he's a vain man. How can he not be a vain man when everyone's been telling him how good looking he is his whole life—? Even when he was a *kid*. *Billy's so cute, Billy's such a handsome little man, oh look at him he looks just like a fucking **angel***. But there's vain and there's *vain*. The kind of vain that's baseless— *that's* the kind of vain he's not.

He's damn good looking and he knows it, and he *knows* what people look like when they agree, when they *want* him, and the way Steve was looking at him— and it's not just the headache, he's sure of it. He's helped guys to bed before when they were fucked up— not many and not like *that*, but some— like when Jay ran his bike into that streetlight that time staring at that girl's tits and knocked himself stupid. He knows what guys that don't want to fuck him— and that *he* doesn't want to fuck either— look like when he's getting their jeans off and that's *not* the way Steve was looking at him.

Steve was looking at him like—

Hah. Hah ha ha ha *yes*. Steve *wants* him. Steve *is*, at least a little, *gay* after all. He wasn't totally fucking *deluded*. Steve wants him and he wants Steve and—

And—

He could *have* Steve.

Not just— Like, fucking him would be totally fucking *amazing*— but he could, actually, probably, really *date* Steve. Like Steve was his girlfriend— fuck. No, *boyfriend*. Take him out somewhere nice, buy him something nice, be *real* nice and at the end of the night maybe Steve would be real *nice* in return.

Yeah—

Hah—

Jesus *Christ* he *wants* it enough he actually thinks he'll go for it.

How the fuck do you ask out a guy though?

Fuck that, how the hell do you even ask out someone you're serious about?

Ok. No. The *guy* thing might really be an issue, because a bunch of flowers and a charming smile doesn't sound quite right. Object of his — *whatever he feels*— or not— fucking good cook, and good with kids as well— but Steve is still a guy. A *man*.

What? A fucking six-pack and a hand on his dick—?

But that doesn't seem very *Steve*. Steve may be a guy but he's a different *type* of guy. All neat and preppie and shit— *Good manners*. Considerate—

And suddenly all the fizz is going out of the world because Steve is a *good person* and deserves better than the shit the universe will rain on him if they did start dating.

After who-knows-how-long of sitting resting his head on his hands on the wheel he sits up, starts the car, heads to the pool. He's late. He's probably in a whole shitload of trouble.

He doesn't *care*.

—

45. Chapter 45

Summary for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For mentions of racism, misogyny, homophobia, and a CONTENT WARNING: for a bit of hetero sex, do let me know if I missed any as I am tired and not thinking straight right now.

It's still the weekend here and I have managed to get this posted, yay me! Sorry it's running a bit late, it has been one of those days. I hope you're all well, and the world is treating you kindly. Thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and kudos!

When he arrives at the pool something's obviously up. As he pulls into one of the employee parking spots he can't see anyone in the water through the fence, and when he gets out of the car to the tortured sound of pool equipment malfunctioning and goes around the front he finds people milling around wrapped in towels, gossiping.

Adam peels away from where he's been leaning against a wall, smoking, offering first the pack of cigarettes—he takes one, lights up — and then the words, 'Salamanders. *Again*. Jesus, what is wrong with this town.'

'Salamanders,' he repeats, glancing away from the guy as a white van pulls up and people in what looks more like *hazard gear* than *Salamander removal gear* pile out. What the fuck does he know about the dangers of rotting Salamanders in pool equipment though?

'Yep,' Adam says, mouth popping on the 'p.' 'Wanna get out of here? Brad's having a party later—'

'It's *Sunday*,' he points out, feeling mildly and irrationally outraged.

Adam shrugs. 'Summer's winding up, college will be starting soon—I don't know man, things have been so *weird* these last few years. I

guess it's a kind of group hysteria. *Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die—*'

'Fuckit, *fine*,' he sighs, rubbing a hand roughly over his face. At least this way he won't have to pay for all the booze it's going to take to stop him thinking he could *have* Steve if he just cared a little less about him.

—

He spends the afternoon hanging out with Brad and Adam, helping the former set up for the party, smoking and not really listening to the two of them chattering at each other the way they do. Fucking weirdly *co-dependant*.

For a bit, late in the day, he thinks maybe they're both— *Californian* — just hiding it from him— but then he remembers what Brad's like drunk and then the guy starts going on about Amy and whether she's coming to the party and whether she'll hook up with someone else— in a way that makes it creepily clear that the jock is into that. Into being rejected. Possibly even into *sloppy seconds*— and, like always, he ends up wondering *what the fuck* is wrong with the guy instead of wondering if he's secretly sucking Adam's dick on the regular.

It's almost funny, later, party full swing, him and Amy in the same room as always, the room where things go sideways every time he tries to get some— and he should be remembering that while he's kissing her, while he's *knowingly* trying to bury his feelings for Steve in her flesh, but he forgets.

Forgets while he gets her naked. Forgets while he gets a couple of fingers up her. Forgets while he's rolling on the rubber and contemplating actually letting her ride him— because he knows her, knows Brad, knows this house— and shit doesn't ever seem to go the way he wants it but so far the only person who's gone for his head here has been *Tommy H.* and that prick is never invited anymore.

In the end he gets her on her back, has got himself lined up, the head of his dick just brushing her pussy but—

'I can't,' he blurts out, flinging himself back off her, sitting on the

bed, dick still hard, naked except for his t-shirt.

‘*What?*’ she yelps, sitting up with a *look* on her face. *Hurt*, he thinks. ‘This better not be about *me*,’ she hisses. ‘If you’ve suddenly decided you’re too good to fuck the town *slut*—’

‘What?’ he mirrors, staring at her. ‘The town— Jesus. No. God— Why the fuck do you think I care how many guys you sleep with? What is a *slut* anyway? Stupid fucking— Sex is great. People need to calm the fuck down about it.’

She examines him for a moment before sighing, deflating back against the pillows and reaching for her packet of Eves. Offering one, which he takes, even though it looks weird and long and too *pretty* between his thick fingers. ‘Sorry. God, *sorry*,’ she says as she lights the cigarettes. ‘Staci Matherson has been such a *bitch* to me today. She even called me a— Oh God, it doesn’t matter what she called me — Well— it *does*, but I don’t want to repeat it. *Racist piece of shit*— You know, I think when I get out of this town, go to college, I’m going to shave my head, let it all grow back *natural*, you know? Not that you probably care. I just I wanted to *tell* someone.’

He blinks at her ‘What?’

‘For a moment I forgot you didn’t grow up here,’ she says, looking down at her cigarette, bitter twist to her mouth. ‘I guess you’ve never met my mom—’ she looks up at him with a challenge in her hazel eyes. ‘Yeah, I look *white*, I know, but I’m *not*. You gonna go wash your dick now?’

He chokes on all his outraged squawking about *what kind of man she thinks he is*— trying not to remember that shit with Sinclair— before the words ‘*It’s not about that. I’m in love with Steve!*’ splutter their way out of his mouth without his permission.

They stare at each other.

‘You’re—’ she breathes out.

‘*Bisexual*,’ he snaps, in case she misunderstood and thought he was saying he was just gay or something— then almost drops his cigarette

when he realises what he just said. *Oh fuck—*

She starts giggling, hunched over and almost collapsing face first on the bed. He stares at her. Words escape his lips, but he's not quite sure what they are or if they're making sense and maybe *fuck you* and *there's nothing wrong with me* and *I'm not fucking disgusting* might be in there, but she's waving the hand holding the cigarette at him to stop him and dragging herself upright enough to say, red faced, 'No. No, no, no. I'm not grossed out or anything. I think it's— it's—' her nose scrunches up, contemplative, and then she smiles at him, '*Cool— bisexual—* very *not Hawkins—* God, I hate this town— also you have a *killer* taste in guys Billy. Oh my God. You do not know— Wow. Steve is just— He is *lovely*,' and then, conversationally, *unhelpfully*, 'You know, you can get him to come from playing with his nipples.'

And his dick *throbs* at the thought. And he lists over on the bed to stare at nothing for a while as she drags herself together, makes herself stop giggling, and all he can think is *love*.

He said *love*.

—

And it's *true*.

Oh God. He is in *love* with Steve.

—

The laugh bubbles up from somewhere deep down inside and soon he's lying on the bed *cackling*, his laughter setting her off again until someone's rattling the doorknob and then banging on the door and Brad's voice is calling out, 'No one's OD'd or anything in there? You sound high as fuck.'

'It's all cool Bradley,' Amy pulls herself together enough to call back. 'We'll be out soon, and then you are going to get me a drink— something *nice*, something from your daddy's liquor cabinet, you hear me?— and then maybe I might let you dance with me for a while.'

A pause. 'Ready and raring to be of service, my *Goddess*,' is purred back and he gags, fucking horny Brad voice. Yuck.

He gives Amy a *look* and she shrugs, waiting a moment for the sound of Brad's heavy footsteps to fade, and then saying, 'What? He's *fun*.'

'Fun—' he muses. '*That's* your idea of fun?' a horrible thought 'You're not telling me *Steve's* like that?'

She snorts out a laugh, '*God* no. He's more—' she bites her lip, a little smirk twitching around the corners of her mouth, and he's thinking maybe he shouldn't have asked because the combination of *that look* and the thought of the brunet is making his dick start to chub back up a bit. After a moment she says, 'He's *sweet*. He likes to *please*— but he's not all—' and then she does a worryingly accurate imitation of Brad going, "'*Oh God yes my Goddess, step on my dick, just like that*'" and he starts to feel like his brain is dribbling out of his ears. She *looks* at him, challenging, 'You got a problem with stuff like that?'

'You think there's something wrong with *me* for not wanting my dick stepped on,' he snaps back at her, feeling weirdly *judged*.

She rolls her eyes, 'No, I can get why *that's* more a specialised thing—I *meant*, do you have a problem with girls being in charge? In the bedroom?'

Jesus *Christ*. 'Of course not!' he snaps, trying not to imagine having this conversation with Max sometime in the next five years. He's pretty sure she, at least, thinks she's the boss in her relationship with Sinclair and she is *not* the type to put up with anyone telling her otherwise. *Good*. Good, but oh God does he not want to hear about it. 'I don't *care*. I don't care if you step on his dick or he likes it and you like it or any of that shit. I don't care. At all. I mean— personally, don't really like being bossed around, but that's by *anyone*—' why is he trying to explain himself to her? Jesus. This whole night he's been off balance, out of kilter, all because of—

Steve.

And, yeah, Brad Dailey's boner-killing house. But mainly—

Steve.

Steve who can come from having his nipples played with.

Jesus.

Which she's gotta know because *she's done it*—

It probably is sexist of him that he minds, but nowhere near as fucking much as he would if it was *Adam* or some other guy—

—

‘Jesus, it’s *fine* Billy-boy,’ she says. ‘Don’t get your panties in a twist. Most guys are surprisingly *conservative* underneath it all.’

‘I’m not *conservative*,’ he glares at her. ‘*Bisexual*, remember.’

She frowns for a moment, like she forgot. ‘*True*— I suppose not so conservative after all.’ A pause, then she says, ‘I really don’t mind. I really never got what the problem was— If everyone’s having fun what does it matter if it’s a guy and a girl, or two guys— or two *girls* — or *more*. Or any combination of— yeah. So I won’t tell anyone and I won’t give you any shit for it, ok?’

He examines her for a moment, then looks away, fetches his jacket and pulls out his Gauloises, lighting up then using his Zippo to light her new Eve for her. ‘Ok,’ he says, nodding at her. *Ok*.

Later she goes off to dance and *whatever* with Brad, he returns to what turns out to be an empty home— a message from Max on the machine saying she’s staying with the Byers. *Good*. He hesitates near the phone, wondering if he should ring the Harrington house, see if Steve’s ok— also whether he should ring the Byers and ask Max for Sinclair’s number so he can finally apologize for all of it to the little puke— but it’s *late*. It’s late and he needs more time. Needs time to pull himself together—

Particularly before he sees Steve again.

In the dark of his room he thinks about it. Being in love with Steve—

Love is not. Not is not just wanting to *date* someone. Love is serious. *Serious*.

Love is—

Maybe he's a fool and a romantic, but if he's in actual, real, *love* with Steve then how can he let that slip through his fingers? *How?*

He *can't*.

He has to go for it.

Fuck. He's going to have to work out how to ask Steve out.

46. Chapter 46

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for mentions of homophobia and domestic violence/child abuse, please let me know if I missed any.

I hope you're all ok, and that things are going as well as they can be where you are. We're finally out of stage 4 lockdown here, which is so amazingly weird. You can actually go to a retail shop now, or a cafe/bar/restaurant. Wow. Thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and kudos! I hope you enjoy... Billy Hargrove: fashion consultant.

He wakes in his own bed again.

—

He feels *wrong*.

Why isn't he in the forest?

—

He lies there for a long while, smoking, not thinking, just listening to the stilted sounds of his dad and Susan leaving for the day.

When they're gone he gets up, makes himself some coffee and some food and answers the phone when it rings— Adam, the pool's still closed again. *Jesus*— and feels a bit like he's going insane.

After that he rings the Byers house, asks for Max— listens to her babble for a bit, listens to her tell him she rang Steve and he's *fine*, listens to her tell him she and El and Sinclair and Wheeler Jr. are going on a fucking *double date* later, listens to her tell him she's probably going to try and sleep over at the Byers place again— listens to her—

—

He does his weights then goes for a run— anything to burn off whatever's got him feeling so skittery, twitchy, going out of his head — thinking of having a shower when he gets back, thinking he needs a haircut, wondering if his facial hair is really as epic as he thinks it is, going over his wardrobe— trying to pick something to wear to see Steve again, something *nice*, sexy but not *intimidating*— wondering if he needs a new cologne, if Steve likes Aramis and Paco Rabbane, if—

The little Byers fa— *kid*— is sitting on the front steps when he gets back.

He slows, stops, stares at the boy. 'What?'

The kid's eyes briefly meet his, flick away, then meet his again, a pained, kind of constipated, *determined* look coming over the boy's face. 'I need your help with something.'

His first thought is, 'Is this about *Max*?'

'What? No,' the kid shakes his head, eyes darting around like he thinks he's being spied on. 'Can we go inside or something? I don't want to talk about this out here.'

He shrugs, 'Yeah, I guess,' waiting for the kid to stand up before brushing past the boy to open the front door, leading little Byers inside.

'Is anyone else here?' the kid asks, looking around nervously. Ok. This is looking real fucking *suspicious*.

'No, kid. No one's here. Now, what do you want?'

Those eyes finally fix back on his face. Little Byers swallows, audibly, nervous, lips twitching for a moment before the words, '*I'm gay*,' come blurting out.

He blinks. 'If this is some attempt at a come-on, you are way too young for me—' he starts, only to be interrupted.

'*What?* NO! I just—' another nervous gulp, 'Before I say anything else I want you to know, ok? Because I'm not trying to trick you or anything, and I know you might be uncomfortable having much to do

with a gay guy and—’

Looks like it’s his turn to interrupt before the kid gets too freaked out. ‘It’s not like it’s a *surprise*,’ he says.

‘What?’ little Byers mouths, eyes wide.

He scratches awkwardly at the back of his neck, feeling sweat drying in his curls. ‘It’s no big deal kid, ok? It’s never made me want to avoid you before and it’s not going to make me want to avoid you now—’ the kid looks totally fucking nonplussed, all massive— *sad*— eyes, so he adds, ‘*Thank you for telling me though*,’ in the hope that maybe that’s what the boy wants.

‘Um—’ little Byers manages, taking a moment to get his thoughts together. Obviously the kid thought the *gay* thing would be a bigger deal, but even without his— *recent revelations*— he’d already decided the kid’s sexuality wasn’t going to be an issue for him. *Maybe he should mention the bisexual thing—?*

No. Nope. No way. Amy knowing— and maybe *Adam*— is too much already. The only people whose business it is are him and Steve— When he gets around to, you know, *dealing with* the Steve issue.

Eventually the kid shakes himself out of whatever that was enough to start talking, hesitantly at first, before becoming more confident. ‘Yeah. Um— Well. Since, you know, *gay*— um. Also gay and a *loser*—’ the kid sighs, ‘There’s two things. Two things I want your help with. I don’t want to be a loser anymore and you’re like, *cool*, so if you could help me with that, that and, um, you’re *strong*. You’re strong and I need you to teach me how to be strong, to get fit and maybe how to *fight*? Because, *gay*, and I’m not stupid or naïve, I know what people think of gays, and I don’t want to get hurt, beaten up or *killed*— and if someone *tries* I want to have a chance at defending myself—’ there the kid pauses, looks thoughtful, ‘—a-and, maybe, *other people*, you know, who aren’t very good at that stuff—’

The way the kid says it— He means *Steve*. Probably. And maybe it’s only wishful thinking but it makes sense, doesn’t it? It makes sense that the kid wants to be able to defend *Steve*— and it’s a combination of the relief of some form of outside affirmation that Steve’s gay, or

maybe bisexual like him, or just into *him*, and the fact the kid wants to protect the brunet, that makes him probably way too eager to accept.

He gets another coffee and smokes a cigarette as the two of them sit at the kitchen table so he can interrogate the kid about his level of physical fitness, before they come up with a plan to improve it.

Going on runs together, swimming, weights— and he gives the kid an old set he's got lying around, one he grew out of even *before* he became— whatever it is he is. He'll supervise the kid's workouts for a while, 'till he's sure the kid knows what he's doing, he doesn't want the boy injuring himself after all.

He also goes over some basic self-defense moves that living with Neil and getting in fights with— *a lot of*— guys over the years have taught him. When the kid's fitter, stronger, then he'll teach the boy how to fight properly, but not before it's not guaranteed to get the kid in trouble he can't get himself out of.

Then comes the conversation on *coolness*. 'You need a haircut, *Jesus*,' is the first thing that comes to mind, glaring at that fuck-awful bowlcut. 'And better clothes. Maybe some aftershave— It's about the way you hold yourself too, kid. You need to look— *confident*. Less like you're about to start crying all the time.'

He gets the kid to describe the clothes he has— and there's a fair few that sound salvageable, once he's taught the boy how to put together a proper wardrobe— but there's a few essential pieces the kid could do with— though maybe the boy's too young for silk shirts and biker boots. Whatever. They can work out a *look* that'll work for now. The haircut though— it's fucking *tragic*.

This is where they hit the first snag— being that the kid refuses to get it cut in Hawkins where the kids that— sadly *unsurprisingly*— like to taunt him might see. So that means a trip out of town. A trip out of town sounds actually pretty cool— they can go looking for new clothes for the kid and he can get some new duds himself, maybe get a haircut of his own— all ready for when he musters up the balls to go round Steve's and do what needs doing— but then they hit the second snag. The second snag being *money* and the kid acting like the

idea of him paying for their little trip and anything they bring home from it is a massive fucking *insult*.

And, ok, he gets it. Is not too keen on people handing out charity his way, but that's different, that's other people and that's him. He's feeling generous right now—

He's not thinking about his dwindling bank balance.

—

In the end, after more bitching and moaning than he thinks it all warrants, they agree to stopping at the Byers place so the kid can get some of his savings— *actual fucking paper money*. Kid needs a bank account. *Jesus*— and anything more than that he'll lend the kid and the kid will pay him back— not that he cares, but whatever, as long as it stops all the *complaining*.

Still, no point making things unnecessarily expensive. A few towns over they've not that long ago put in their own mall— which is now where half of Hawkins is doing their shopping. Turns out it's pretty fucking easy to get *habituated* to that level of excessive capitalism— and he remembers what happened to Main Street when Starcourt arrived— no point not taking the opportunity to grab a bargain because some other town's little mom and pop stores are going out of business.

He leaves little Byers in his bedroom while he has a shower— no way is he going out stinking of sweat— with the orders to keep out of trouble and be real quiet and possibly hide if it sounds like someone's come home and especially if that someone sounds like *Neil*.

Of course, kids being *kids*, he comes out of the bathroom— fully dressed, no need to give the kid either a complex or a boner at the sight of his naked body— to find the boy looking through one of his skin mags with an expression of vaguely horrified disbelief. 'Pussy really doesn't do it for you, huh?' he muses as he takes the magazine from the boy's slackening grasp.

The kid shakes his head rapidly, bowl-cut flying. 'Sorry! I— I was *curious*. Jonathan doesn't have— or if he does I've never been able to

find them— and I *hate* the idea of looking at Lucas' dad's ones if *Mike's* there—' the kid takes a deep breath. 'I shouldn't have gone through your stuff. I know.'

'Don't sweat it kid.' If the kid wasn't what the kid is— or if he had some gay skin mags or something— assuming they make those. He's never gone looking— this'd probably be the time he did his duty as a dude and passed on the torch to the younger generation, handing over a couple all misty eyed with the remembrance of the first time he got his hands on some from someone's older brother— like what he heard from Jay or some of the other guys he hung around with back in Cali.

Or, in his case, stole some of his dad's.

It's weird, doing his hair, getting ready the rest of the way, all under the gaze of the kid. He wonders if Will finds him attractive, actually has the balls to ask— well, not quite out and out ask *that*, but he does ask, 'So, kid, what kind of guys are you into?' as he's checking himself over in the mirror— *Damn* he looks good.

The kid rolls his eyes, 'I'm not about to hit on *you*, if that's what you're worried about. You're not my type.'

He gives the boy a *look*, 'I am *everyone's* type.'

The kid *looks* back, a bit incredulous and a *lot* challenging. 'I'm not blind. I know you're *hot*— but you're also—' a shrug, 'I dunno. Too *blond* or something.'

He thinks of Steve's brown hair— loose, brushing his shoulders. 'I can get that.'

The boy gives him a different kind of *look*, considering, but doesn't say anything.

There's no one at the Byers place when they get there— a relief. No questions. No bitch-faced Wheeler and Bigger Byers looking at him like scum. The kid darts into the house and reappears before he's smoked his second cigarette, and then they're off.

Kid's got good taste in music.

When they get to the remarkably like *Hawkins*— hopefully sans *monsters*— town he doesn't take the turn off to the mall, even though the kid starts asking *why* until he points out that there'll be sales on Main Street— which, guess what, he was *right*.

First thing's first though, that fucking *hair*.

He's surprised to find the one place in town still open— doing hair for men, women and kids, as well as nails and *makeup* apparently— to be neat and clean and obviously still well attended— meaning they actually have to wait for the middle aged housewife ahead of them to be done before it's the kid's turn.

The boy doesn't really seem to know what he wants done with his hair other than *cool*, and *mullet*, so it ends up *his* job to negotiate it with the stylist to make sure little Byers doesn't walk out of there looking like a *fool*. Or him, because he really does need his mullet polished up if he's gonna approach Steve and the *stylist* does do a remarkably good job on the kid's hair.

Though— *why the fuck does a shitty little town like this need a fucking stylist in place of a barber? Guy's obviously gay too*. He considers hitting on the guy for a bit, trying it out— the guy in question is mid-thirties, not bad looking— but also too much of a fucking *cliché*. Too *loud* and *lispy*— not *Steve* enough— but he's also defiant too, he can see it in the man's hazel eyes. It's almost *attractive*. The guy's probably had a shitty time of it— makes him on his best behaviour. No need to be making his fellow queers more unhappy than the world insists they be.

—

It's the *Steve thing*. It's making him *soft*.

—

When it's not making him *hard*, anyway.

—

The guy does a good job of *his* mullet too— Looking in the mirror all he can think is, *Jesus*. If **he** was *Steve* he'd date himself.

—

He pays the stylist, insists on paying for little Byers too— watching the way the man takes his money— all soft hands and neat nails. He's got pretty hands. He was real gentle doing his hair— He wonders if the man has someone. A boyfriend. If they're gentle with him in return— He caught the guy looking at him a few times, *admiring* him — and it was weird and wonderful and confusing. As they leave he feels hazel eyes on his back, and that same prickle of something hot and *exposed* comes over him, but this time it's as he's stepping back into the real world and it hits him— the reality that he's one of *them* too, that if anyone finds out— and the anger flares like he realises it always has, but he *knows* it now, and it turns into something like pleasure at being wanted and sorrow for the mess of society.

Wandering around being queer and knowing it is *weird*.

He wonders what it's like for Steve. Whether they'll ever get a chance to talk about it.

—

What if Steve turns him down? Not because of the *guy* thing, but because of the way he treated the guy, the way he *beat him up*— What if Steve thinks he's hot but *not hot enough* to make up for all of it—

—

—

47. Chapter 47

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For homophobia and for domestic/family violence, please let me know if I missed any.

Here we are with Billy again, nearly to the point his timeline once more coalesces with Steve's. I know it's a bit late, but stuff came up and got in the way of posting, I'm afraid. Sorry everyone. Thank you all so much for sticking with this story for so long, and for the comments and kudos! I really do appreciate you guys. Stay safe out there!

'Is— um— Is everything alright?' little Byers' voice drags him back to reality. He realises he's stopped mid stride on the pavement, staring off into the possibility of a terrible nothingness, packet of Gauloises *crushed* in his fist.

He shakes himself out of it, clears his throat, fishes out one of the salvageable cigarettes and lights up. 'It's fine, kid. Now let's see if we can get you some better clothes.'

Call him a *girl* or a *fag* or *whatever* but he's always liked shopping— Are bisexuals supposed to be more vain than straight guys? He thinks he's heard that somewhere— and maybe that's true, maybe it's not— it sounds like a stereotype or something, if you ask him— but he's not ashamed of the care he takes with his appearance. It'd be a *waste*, wouldn't it, if a guy with his looks *didn't*? Also it's gotten him plenty of girls over the years—

Weird, yeah. Knowing he's queer—

Jesus Christ it's weird. Makes him second guess himself a bit, which he doesn't like.

Confidence is key.

Confidence is sexy.

Confidence will win him Steve— and even if it *doesn't*.

Confidence is fucking *armour*. It lets you get away with a hell of a lot of shit.

It's vaguely interesting wandering around a town so like Hawkins, that isn't actually Hawkins. The longer they stay the more the differences become apparent— yeah, it's Indiana, yeah it's a small town, yeah the architecture is pretty much identical, yeah on the surface it's the same kind of people— but at the same time it's *not*.

Hawkins people have this strange kind of desperation about them these days, like they know something's wrong but just don't want to admit it. Like they can see the monster out of the corner of their eye but as long as they don't turn their head it'll all be ok.

Maybe he should feel a bit guilty for taking advantage of the march of Capitalism to get himself— and the kid— some good stuff at the town's going out of business sales. Malls are a funny thing— like a plague or a disease, come in, wipe everything out that came before. Still, he has *some* cash, but only so much.

He needs to get his shit together. Needs to work out what he's doing with his life—

He gets a few really nice shirts— one the deepest black he thinks he's ever seen in a shirt, another in a pure, bright red— not his usual kind of colour, but on impulse he tries it on and is forced to concede it looks *killer*, and another a soft powder blue that he knows brings out his eyes, makes him look *tanned*— as well as some jeans that are a *steal* at that price. The kid gets a couple pairs of the jeans too— because they're cheap enough it won't matter too much when he grows out of them, when he probably has to hand them down, or up, to bigger Byers— He can already tell little Byers is gonna be the taller one. Kid's growing like a weed. Hands and feet already looking

bigger than his big brother's.

That shitty Wheeler kid is probably still gonna end up the *tallest*, though. Fucking *beanpole*.

He gets the kid a shirt too, and a couple better t-shirts— lecturing the boy on what to wear all of it with, and still dodging the kid's attempts to pay. Smirking and flirting with the bored chicks working the stores that *aw* and *coo* about him treating his *little brother* so well.

Being generous has always felt *good*— though one of these days he's gonna run out of the cash to do it. Well, maybe not if he does end up acting the handsome handy man.

He lets the kid buy him lunch though, when it looks like the boy's about to chuck a tantrum about it. A burger and fries— fucking *excellent*— and a coffee in a dinky little— oddly charming— 1950s style diner.

Still, funny, isn't it, that as they leave the town that day probably the *best* thing they get, clothes wise, is a *killer* leather jacket for the kid at this tiny little thrift shop staffed by this sweet little old lady who flirts with him *outrageously* for someone her age. He flirts back— because she's sweet and nice and it seems to make her day.

The other thing— the thing maybe he shouldn't have bought— is a fucking fully electric, Italian made, *ice-cream maker* at 85% off, because fuck his life he is a loser, and he wants to give Steve something nice, but maybe it's kind of presumptuous like a demand the guy makes him ice-cream, but at the same time— The man in the shop— who went on and on and on about how he couldn't sell the fucking things, and how expensive they'd been, and how much his wife loves hers, but how the instructions are in Italian, and how unadventurous people are, and how he and his wife are probably going to move back to New York, because *fuck small town America*, and he just needs to sell everything, *everything*, ***he needs to get out of here***— did think he was buying it for his mom or something, but Steve's such a good cook, and it seems the kind of thing he'd like, and it reminded him of Steve in that fucking *sailor suit* and that made him wonder if he could get the brunet to wear it again just for him and—

He'd felt weirdly embarrassed carrying the thing back to his baby. Especially with the way little Byers had *looked* at him and said, 'For Steve, huh?'

Yeah, for Steve.

—

On the drive back to Hawkins the kid tries to get him to give him a cigarette— 'I'm not going to be responsible for you getting lung cancer,' is his reply to that one, ignoring the sulk that ensues.

Kid looks good though.

He wakes up in his fucking bed, *again*. Jesus *Christ* he could just about *hit something*—

No dreams either. That's the thing.

—

Little Byers shows up not long after Neil and Susan leave, so they go over how to use the weights and the self-defence moves again, then go on a run together— Kid's got nothing like *his* stamina, so he's still way too energised, *buzzing*, when they have to turn back and the kid gets on his bike and heads home.

He does his own weights, jerks off thinking about Steve, has a shower, smokes and drinks some coffee while checking for apartments in the paper and wondering if he should put an ad in the fucking thing looking for some handyman work.

Adam calls mid-morning to tell him the pool's open again so he drags himself into another boring day at work. He flirts a bit with the chicks, the hot moms, but it doesn't feel serious. Listens to Adam babble on about Salamanders and his fucking *cousin's* inability to identify them even though she's supposedly *super smart*. Heads home, not feeling like going out to the quarry with Adam and Brad for a drink.

Of course when he gets home Neil sends him off to fetch Max, again. It's kind of sad and stupid that Mrs Byers doesn't even ask an

explanation when he shows up on her doorstep, just calls his sister for him.

On the drive back she goes on about seeing Steve— how good he's looking— *why does she give him **that** look when she says that?*— and how little Byers has turned himself into a *mini Billy clone*— her eyes just a little accusing on that one— and a bunch of other shit he doesn't care about. She's *happy* he realises, in this town, with her friends.

He's almost happy too—

Dinner's ok. His dad's actually on his best behaviour and Susan seems a little bit less frosty, but it's still awkward as fuck and neither he nor Max want to be there. They especially don't want to get roped into watching one of his dad's fucking *war films* as a family, but apparently that's what Neil's decided is happening.

Jesus *Christ*.

Well. *Whatever*.

More weights. More jerking off. More sleep— Max not waking him up with a nightmare.

More him waking up in his own bed.

— and that's pretty much how it goes for the next few days. He wakes up in his bed, sees little Byers after his dad's left, helps the kid work out, goes for a run with him, jerks off, goes to work, flirts with chicks, talks shit with Adam, gets more cigarettes at the 7-11— oddly, always sans-Candy—comes home to awkward, but not *awful*, dinners with his well-behaved dad and slowly thawing Susan, gets forced to watch family TV, chats with Max, does his weights, jerks off, sleeps, wakes up in his bed—

Puts off going to see Steve.

He needs to do it *right*.

It's not that he's afraid, it's just that he's—

Afraid.

Fuck. Of course he is, who wouldn't be? It's a big fucking deal.

By Thursday morning he's already decided it'll have to be Friday. He'll go around when the kids aren't there, make whatever moves he's going to make— maybe not give the guy the ice-cream maker, that seems a bit *intense* for a first move— and maybe— If Steve was a chick he'd invite him out to Enzo's or something. But Steve is not a chick. Maybe they could go parking out in the forest somewhere? Or — It'd be a pretty shitty date night if he gets the guy he asked out to cook— but Steve's cooking is the best cooking. Better than fucking Enzo's even if they *could* go there.

He'll do *something*. Work it out at the time. Friday.

Friday.

He *will*.

He's not a fucking *coward*.

Thursday also sees the biggest change in routine. That being that Neil and Susan are going out to dinner with Neil's boss and his wife.

Max spends the day out. Hanging out with Steve and her shitty friends he learns later, when he picks her up. She could have stayed at the Byers' again, but when they heard about their parents' dinner plans she'd looked at him and suggested *pizza and shitty horror movies?* and he'd been sold.

'Mike's freaking out about Will,' is the topic of the night's drive back home. Her conclusion being *Oh My God he's so weird about, like, everyone. If he wasn't like he is with El you'd almost think he was in love with Will.*

Which had made him choke on a lungful of smoke and very carefully ask her if she'd care if the shitty brat was.

The answer had been a fairly concrete *no*. Apparently Max is totally cool with gays, lesbians *and* bisexuals— *did that look she gave him when she said that mean anything?* He's too much of a coward to ask.

The pizza is great, the movies— which they stopped in and got on their way home from the Byers' post *gays are ok* conversation— are appropriately shitty, and all in all it's a good night until their parents get home.

Susan storms in first, hair in a disarray, Neil a moment later. His dad grabs her but she breaks his hold, whirls on him. 'Leave me alone!' she snaps— before the two of them seem to notice their audience.

Jesus Christ. *Not again.*

'—Mom?' Max's voice comes out weak.

'It's fine Max,' Susan rushes to reassure her daughter. 'Everything's fine. It's getting late, why don't you and Billy go to bed now?'

They do. They do because this is becoming far too regular, because they're used to it, because this has been his *life*— first with his mom and then, now, with Susan.

He waits a while, in the dark, in his bed, *listening*— hearing the hushed sound of an argument that eventually gets quiet. The sounds of Neil and Susan getting ready for bed. The sound of *nothing*— then he lets himself sleep.

—

48. Chapter 48

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For graphic domestic violence, child abuse, attempted murder, misogyny, body horror- we are at the chapter where Neil attacks Susan and Max, and it happens onscreen. Please let me know if I missed any.

This isn't the longest chapter, but it's kind of intense, and the flow of the story naturally breaks where it does. After this we are now caught up with Steve once more and everything that will happen will be new. Thank you all for reading, and for the comments and kudos! Stay safe if you can!

Something wakes him. A *bang*. He sits up, flailing at the sidelight. Max—?

‘—*et out of my house! I want you to leave! Leave!*’ No. That’s Susan. Susan shouting.

‘Like you’re some *angel*. You’re a fucking *whore* Susan. A whore! The way you *dress*— You think I like sitting there, watching you try to fuck my boss right in front of me?’

A startled laugh, ‘You’re delusional. You’re *delusional* Neil— You think that just because you’re fucking that *woman* I must be—’ a grunt, ‘—Let me go. *let me go*— You *promised*—’ and then a sound of pain.

He’s up, out of bed, at the door in time to hear Max, again. ‘Mom?’

‘It’s ok sweetheart, it’s ok. Go back to—’

He’s out in the hall, out in the living room. There’s Susan in her pyjamas, there’s his dad shaking her roughly by the arm, there’s Max

rushing over, crying out ‘*Let go of her!*’

‘Max!’ he calls out, ‘Max. Come over here!’ He needs to get her away from his dad.

Neil isn’t paying either of them any attention. His gaze is just on his wife— he looks *insane*. Cruel and crazy, that fucking *feral* glint to his eye. ‘Trying to distract me, you bitch,’ the man snarls. ‘Trying to distract me—’

‘You *cheated on me!*’ Susan roars in his face. ‘You *are still* cheating on me! You swore Neil. You *swore* that you wouldn’t be like Ned!’

‘You can’t fucking *cook* Susan,’ his dad snarls back, shaking her again. ‘You can’t fucking cook. You can’t *fuck*— always bitching at me, always moaning— fucking *frigid* even though your pussy’s so fucking *loose*— that’s why he did it. Ned. Because you’ve got a body like a whore and won’t fucking *put out*. No wonder he went looking *elsewhere*—’

She slaps him. Hard. Across the face.

Oh shit— he’s lurching over there, running— but Neil’s too quick. He punches her, closed fist. Once, twice— she’s going over backwards— Her head *thunks* against the coffee table, a hollow sound— then his dad’s kicking her. *Kicking her*.

Max is screaming, throwing herself at the man, all nails and fists and — and—

Max! He doesn’t know if he thinks it or screams it, but his dad whirls on her and punches her too—

The blood splatters the wall.

She’s making these *noises*. Mewls.

Hurt.

Max is—

I’m going to kill you, old man.

Everything *burns*.

He lunges at his dad, movements strange, jerky— Neil's eyes widen. Widen and then narrow. The man throws a punch, he dodges. Everything looks *wrong*. He can see too much of the room, like he has more eyes than he has.

I'm going to kill you.

Neil tries to hit him again. He lashes out, grabs the fist coming towards his face. *Twists*. He feelshears things *splinter*. His dad *howls* in pain. Howls— picks up the heavy glass ashtray from the coffee table with his other hand and *hurls* it at him. He dodges. His dad lunges again, tries to *kick him*. He *kicks* back, leg long and strange and feeling like it's *splitting*. Bones poking through. Body *shifting*—

It's not enough. Neil doesn't go down. Neil is backing away, throwing anything he can reach at him. His dad looks so *pale*. He can smell *piss*.

Monster.

He's not sure if it's the man's voice or his own, inside his head. He *lunges*, he's going to *rip that fucker's throat out with his teeth and eat it*.

'Biwlly!'

Max.

Hunched over, body strange, he turns his head and sees her— *oh, her nose*— she's hovering over her mom, tears and terror in her face, trying to speak even though it's coming out congested and nasal and there's *blood* pouring down her face. 'Biwlly she *wohn't waygke uhp!* I fink he's *gkiwlled hher!*'

Max.

A blink and he's *him* again and by her side, hunched over Susan— *shit, headwound*. She's still breathing. Still— 'Hospital,' he manages, 'Have to—' he can hear the sound of scrabbling behind him, the sound of the front door banging open, the sound of Neil fleeing into the night— *chase him*— *NO*. Max needs him.

It feels like there's no time to call an ambulance. Like they can't wait — like it's not *safe*—

What if Neil comes back?

He lurches to his feet, bolts to his bedroom, grabs keys and wallet and cigarettes and zippo from the nightstand and shoves his feet into his sneakers even as Max is calling for him. *She's so scared.* 'Get your shoes on Max!' he shouts to her.

Shoes.

Wallet.

Keys—

He grabs his leather jacket and shrugs into it, shoving everything into the pockets so his hands will be free to carry Susan.

'We'll get her to the hospital,' he tells Max as he rushes back into the room. 'They'll take care of her—' he sees her nose, the way it's flattened to the side and feels those lines of fire come back before he forces them away, '—take care of both of you.'

Careful, so very careful, he lifts Susan into his arms, carries her out to the car and lays her on the back seat. After that's a blur. Foot on the accelerator. Hawkins speeding past. The hospital. Parking, badly, in the ambulance bay and piling out. Lifting Susan so carefully from the car while Max screams for help, wailing that her stepfather's killed her mom—

—

Susan is taken from his arms and hurried away and then he's told, in no uncertain terms, to move his car. That they'll see to Max. He doesn't want to leave her— 'I'll be o-kghay Biwlly, it's jhuft for ah miwut,' fuck, she's so *brave*.

He doesn't even linger to smoke after he's got his car parked properly, just rushes back into the emergency department to find—

Apparently *seeing to Max* doesn't mean seeing to Max *immediately*.

Jesus Christ, *look at her fucking nose people*. They sit there for a moment, her holding a cloth or something someone's given her under her nose while the blood runs down, the bottom of the t-shirt he was sleeping in *clutched* in her fist— Then she's crying. Crying *properly*. ***Sobbing***— 'Ih whant mah *d-dahdh!*'

Of course she does.

'We'll ring him,' he tells her, helping her to her feet while she clings to his t-shirt. Fuck. She's *shaking*. Making these horrible, blubbing, choked up *wet* noises and spluttering *blood* everywhere. She's wearing her slippers instead of shoes— there's blood splattered all over their cheery fabric. Drying. Getting *dark*— Fuck these fucking *nurses*— they'll ring her dad and then he is going to go over and rip *everyone* a new one until she gets seen—

Oh God. His body hurts. *Burns*.

He shouldn't have let the old man escape.

Kill him.

Fuck—

He gets her over to the payphones, where everyone helpfully gets the fuck out of the way, and then feeds coins into one so she can dial her dad's number. He hears the man pick up—

'*Dhaddhy, dhaddhy—*' she's mewling down the line.

Oh God. He's gonna— he's gonna—

He's coming *apart*.

Shaking, almost dropping the coins, he feeds them into the phone next to her, scrabbles at the dial pad, waits. Waits—

'*What?!*' snapped down the line and he almost hangs up. Doesn't want Steve angry with him— but the brunet's speaking again, soft and sweet and *fuck he's missed that voice*. 'Billy?! What's wrong?'

49. Chapter 49

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For child abuse and domestic violence, attempted murder, body horror, and a tiny bit of anti-Semitism, please let me know if I missed any.

Billy and Steve actually interact in this chapter, not that Billy is up to much, interacting- or even *thinking* wise. Poor Billy. Poor Max. Poor *Susan*. Anyway, I hope you find it interesting. Thank you all, so much, for the comments and kudos! I hope you're all keeping well.

He loses a bit of time then. Part of him can feel it happening. Part of him pulls in blinks of information, fluorescent lights, the smell, the sounds, crying all around him, blood— not just hers. Other people's.

Blood.

Max then, leaning against him as they sit on a hard chair.

Her blood.

—

He hates Neil.

—

The feel of her hair beneath his, heavy, wrong feeling hand as he tries to comfort her. Her saying something about her dad coming, her dad keeping all of them *safe*.

He can do that, he wants to say, but it's like he's forgotten how to *peak*.

He thinks about getting her a Pepsi. He thinks about getting her some chocolate. He thinks about coming apart, becoming flesh and bones

and *teeth* and killing everyone in this whole fucking town other than her and Steve and El and little Byers and the rest of Max's shitty friends and Robin and Amy and Mrs Byers and maybe the Chief of Police—

Then there's hands and noise and voices making demands of him and she's crying out and she's being *hurt* and he's being dragged to his feet and dragged away from her and—

Cops. *Not Chief Hopper.*

The face of a nurse, cold, *condemning him.*

'We just want to know what happened—'

—

He is coming apart—

—

He is, isn't he? He's going to *kill them all—*

—

'Get your hands off him!'

Warmth.

That *scent—*

In between him and enemies—

Enemies grabbing at him.

Kill—

'Get your— Get— NO! No! Touch him again and I will *call my mom's lawyers*, swear to God,' so much authority in that usually deferential voice. So much— *Steve*. Steve in front of him, Steve in between him and the cops— Max. Where is—? 'My *grandad's* lawyers! Do you know who he is? Yes? Yes? Leave him alone or I will *ruin your lives*, you get that? I will personally wreck *this whole Goddamn town!* I

mean it! I'm not my dad, this isn't a fucking *meaningless threat*, I will — *Hopper!*

'WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?!'

The Chief of Police is there, suddenly looming. So is Mrs Byers, looking harried and worried and insisting that the cop let Max go. There is more noise, more voices, the cops trying to grab him suddenly desperate to explain. The nurse called them. The nurse said he was *suspicious*—

The nurse thinks *he* hurt Susan, hurt Max—

'I *wouldn't!*' he sounds like a child. 'I'd *never*— I'm not **Neil!!**'

He's coming apart.

And then there is Steve, Steve pulling him into his arms, Steve guiding his head down onto that broad shoulder so that sweet-smelling, product stiff brown hair brushes his face, Steve humming, soft and soothing. 'It's ok Billy. It's ok— I know you'd *never*. I won't let them get away with suggesting it. I promise. I *promise*.'

He sinks into Steve's warmth, letting his head go fuzzy and empty, but only really relaxing a moment later when Max is back by his side, clinging onto his wrist and snarling at the nurse and the cops the best she can considering her nose.

He thinks he hears Chief Hopper saying something like, 'You think she'd be spitting at you like a hellcat right now if he really was the one who did that to her face?—' and 'No, you listen to *me*, she's my kid's *best friend*, which means I've gotten to know him a bit, enough to know that whatever's been going wrong in that house *he's* not at the heart of it,' and 'Do I have to spell it out for you? *Find Neil Hargrove and bring him in*. Jesus.'

And then he loses a bit more to the smell and feel and presence of Steve, to Max's hand in his, to the sound of Mrs Byers angrily demanding Max's nose *Goddamn well* gets seen to—

—

And then he is sitting on a hard, plastic chair beside a bed where a harried looking nurse is doing something to Max's nose while she clings to his hand and makes only the faintest of whimpering noises. He squeezes back, trying to look reassuring.

There's a vague memory of stripping out of his clothes, putting them in the evidence bag the Chief of police gave him— he's wearing scrubs and slippers. Hospital gear. His cigarettes and wallet making an ugly bulge in the pockets— Max is too. Both of them in bright, cheery blue.

Beside him is a warmth, *Steve*, holding his other hand and chattering away nervously to the only other person in the room, Mrs Byers— the woman keeping a watchful eye on what the nurse is doing to Max.

He blinks. Tries to get his head to work, his ears, tunes in enough that the mindless sound of Steve starts to become *words*, 'Oh my God, I went full upper-middle class WASP on them, didn't I?— That's really. Oh my God, *blood will out*, won't it?— Though— I mean my dad's Jewish, technically— or my grandma was, you know, which means he is— or should be? I think? Not that he admits it— oh and *French*, she was French. He admits *that*— God he's a *dick*— but the *rest of them*— I think. Actually— no, mom's family must be German originally, at least a little bit— or maybe *Russian*? No. *German*— maybe German *and* Russian— um. Wow, sorry. I'm. I'm *babbling*—'

'S-Steve,' he manages.

'*Billy*! Oh my God, are you ok? Of course you're not— Um. Are you feeling any *better*?'

He brings a hand up to his face, brushes it across the bridge of his nose— *it no longer burns*. 'Fuck,' he breathes out. *Oh fuck he was about to totally lose his shit, wasn't he?* Oh fuck, his *dad*— Max is here, but, '*Susan*?' he demands, regretting it just a little when Max's hand clenches down super tight on his.

Steve glances at Mrs Byers, then back at him. 'We haven't heard anything yet,' the brunet says.

Mrs Byers nods, speaks, voice so very *gentle*, 'Jim's gone to find out

anything he can before he has to go and deal with your father—'

'He's been arrested?' he demands.

She shakes her head, 'I'm not sure. Jim won't let him get away with this though, I *swear*.'

He almost laughs. He almost says something about how very good his dad is at wriggling out of this kind of shit, but Max is here— *Max*— He can't bring himself to suggest her mom— that *she*— might not get justice, not in front of her.

He glances at her again, sees the bruises coming up— She's a *girl*. Yeah, ok, a very *modern* girl, but she's a *girl*— the kind of girl who would probably tell him off for suggesting she cares that much about how she looks, but she does, everyone does, that's the way the fucking world works. If his dad's fucked her nose up permanently he's gonna— gonna— Well. Find a way to make the man pay for the best fucking nose job money can buy, for one.

He feels Max's fingers clench in his, a flinch running through her. Even though the woman seems harried the nurse tending her still makes a soft sound of sympathy and then says, 'I'm sorry dear, but I've got to get this set. I'll give you a little more anaesthetic, ok? You hold tight to your brother's hand and it'll only be a moment.'

He watches, he knows he does, but it's like his brain can't take any of it in, like all he can sense is Steve's warmth and Max's hand in his, clenching tight. He's saying something, he thinks. Trying to reassure her. She's so brave—

She doesn't sob again, but by the time the nurse has packed her nose and got the cast on it tears are leaking out of her eyes and—

Neil is fucking dead.

Once she's done the nurse leaves them alone, saying something about organising some pain management. Max is trembling. *He's* trembling. She says his name, half coherent, nasal, and then he's up, muscling onto the bed next to her, and wrapping her in his arms. 'I won't let him hurt you. Not again,' he breathes into her hair.

Mrs Byers is there then, petting at her, soothing them both, telling them both they were *so brave, so brave*— and he reaches for Steve before he can think about it and the brunet reaches back and he sits there, Max in his arms, Steve's hand tangled in his, until the Chief comes back.

The man asks him to come out into the hall, and he doesn't want to and Max doesn't want him to, but there's something in the guy's gaze — Steve comes with him. Mrs Byers stays with Max— and he can trust her with Max, she's a good woman. He can see she's a good woman. And—

Susan is in surgery. Skull fracture. Bleed on the brain— Steve's hand is the only point of warmth in what feels like a long, dark, *cold* tunnel — and 'I'm supposed to tell you that you should have waited for an ambulance, but the doctors told me that with the kind of injury she sustained time is of the essence. Every minute counts. If the surgery goes well they're hopeful she'll make a good recovery. *Really* hopeful — and that's thanks to you, kid. *Guy*. Young ma— *Billy*. That's thanks to you, Billy.'

And then the man wants to know what happened. The *details*. Because the man is a cop and the man is going to have to arrest his dad because his dad hit Max and tried to *kill* Susan. May have killed Susan if the surgery does not go well.

Steve stays with him. They go to a room nearby, in some part of the hospital still being fixed up after the Mind Flayer did what it did. The Chief collects an assortment of uncomfortable chairs from the empty halls. He gets to smoke— because this part of the hospital is not being used. There's no patients— The Chief smokes too. So does Steve, taking a Gauloise when he offers it— and he's *here* enough to smile a little at the wince on that pretty face at the first puff of the French cigarette.

He keeps a hold of Steve's hand as he tells the cop everything. Everything that happened earlier. Everything that seemed to lead up to what happened earlier. Everything and then *more*. Things like— *yes, his dad hits him. Has hit him for a long time. Yes, his dad used to hit his mom. Yes, his dad has hit Susan before— or at least he thinks so. Bruises. The fear in her. No, before today his dad has never hit Max. If*

*his dad had hit Max then he would have had to do something about it and He thinks maybe he broke his dad's arm, but the man was **hurting** Max, Susan—*

And then the questions become Does his dad have any friends in town? Is there anywhere Neil might go? How well does the man know the town and its surrounds? Is he likely to head off into the woods? Does Neil have a gun? Any other weapons?

No, Neil doesn't have friends. The man never had friends— though there's probably a woman. He has no idea where his dad might go, he doesn't know the man well enough. Same with how well Neil knows the town, the surrounds, the woods. He can't say if Neil has a gun. All he can think is if the man does he would have used it on *him* earlier, but he didn't, so—? No idea about other weapons either.

No idea.

No—

'He won't get away with it. I *swear to you*, he won't get away with it —' is the last thing the Chief says as they head back to the room where Max is, just before the man heads out to try and bring his dad in.

Then there's Max. Then there's telling Max her mom's in surgery. Then—

She's crying again.

She wants her dad.

His whole body is fire and he's coming apart and—

Steve's hand in his. Warm. All that's keeping him together.

—

50. Chapter 50

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For the aftermath of attempted murder, domestic violence, child abuse, and the usual Billy type language. I have probably missed one this time as I am quite tired, so please do let me know if I have.

Just a quick little reminder that I have written ahead until Billy and Steve are together, and after that this fic is going on hiatus- hopefully only temporarily, but I do feel like I need a break from it. Thank you all so much for sticking with the story so far, and for the comments and kudos, I hope you enjoy the chapters still to come, and, of course, this one! Stay safe everyone.

Eventually a nurse comes and tries to shoo them out of the room but then Mrs Byers starts snapping at the woman, flinging the Chief's name around, until they're allowed back to the room where the cop questioned him earlier to wait in peace. To wait.

After a while Max dozes off against him, trembling even in the heat. He holds her there with one hand so she won't slip. Won't hurt herself.

The other hand he keeps tangled in Steve's.

They wait.

They wait.

Every now and then Mrs Byers says something reassuring but he's not really listening. He's not really—

Is this even real?

It doesn't feel real.

It's a long time until they hear anything.

—

It's funny how quickly things change. One moment it's just the four of them, the room's quiet, still, dread hanging in the air, the next a doctor is coming in to tell him and Max that Susan's out of surgery, that it was a success, that she's being moved to the ICU. They're even going to let him and Max see her, but only for a minute, then they'll have to come back during visiting hours.

There's more waiting then, but it's not the quiet waiting of before. Instead they're all up and about and pacing the halls and Max is about three seconds from freaking out and throwing a tantrum because it's taking longer than the doctor said it would and she's convinced something awful has happened and he's freaking out because she's freaking out and—

Steve's there. Steve's holding his hand again. Steve's suddenly holding Max's as well. Steve's— *humming*. Again. This soft, nonsense tune, and it all just seems to float away—

They're all very calm when the nurse comes to fetch him and Max to see Susan, leaving a worried looking Steve and Mrs Byers in the hall.

—

They've shaved the side of her head. There's a bandage over it.

—

Her face has come up in bruises.

—

She's surrounded by machines, beeping, hissing— he thinks *breathing* for her—

—

*What has Neil **done**?*

—

Max's hand is a claw-grip in his, her eyes as wide as she can manage with the swelling— red too, from crying, but also— there's blood trapped beneath the conjunctiva of her left eye. Bruises around them, under them, across her face.

—

*He will **kill** the bastard—*

—

And then they have to leave. They can come back later, when it's light. Not that Susan will know they're there. Susan will be in an induced coma for the next couple of days.

Because *Neil almost killed her.*

—

The moment they're back with Steve and Mrs Byers the brunet's hand is reaching for him again and he lets himself tangle his fingers with the other guy's. He feels weird. So weird.

The anger comes and goes and when it comes it's like it's eating him alive, tearing him apart, and he is, he is *coming apart*, but when it goes he feels empty. So empty. *Empty like he felt when he found Uncle Harry.*

Empty.

Everything's so far away—

Everything but the warmth of Steve's hand in his.

He's not sure what happens next, whose idea it is— he thinks Mrs Byers— but the next thing that feels *real* is being bundled into the back of her car after Max— then Steve, to sit next to him— so she can drive them back to her house for them to “*try and get some sleep, for a few hours at least. You both need it. It's— It's been a really tough night, hasn't it? They'll call us from the hospital if anything changes, I*

*made them **promise**— not that they wouldn't anyway, but I've known Callie Reese since we were kids and she **knows** not to mess with me, and since she's going to be on duty—"*

He tunes the rest of it out. It's a good idea, he's not going to argue. Max is wilting against him, dozing only to jerk awake at every bump with a pained mewl. 'We're almost there,' he says to her, quietly. 'You can see El. You can get some sleep—'

She mumbles something about wanting to stay with her mom, sounding exhausted and scared and congested.

'She'd want you to take care of yourself. Want *meto* take care of you. Don't worry about it. We'll see her in the morning.'

Fuck. He has no idea what he's doing—

He tries to imagine what's going to happen next but he can't— his brain just isn't processing a future based on what's happened. Things should go back to normal. Things have always gone back to normal— no matter what his dad has done in the past there's never been *consequences*, not for Neil.

Now the old bastard has Chief Hopper chasing him down—

Still—

Neil is his kill.

—

At the Byers' it's obvious everyone's been awake since Steve called. The door opens as Mrs Byers pulls in and he gets a brief glimpse of bigger Byers before his attention is on El racing down the front steps towards them. The moment the car stops Max has her door open and is out there, flinging herself into the other girl's arms and bursting once more into tears.

He gets out after her, Steve following, Mrs Byers scurrying forward and shooing everyone into the house. There's little Byers, looking pale and big eyed, lingering as if he's not sure if he should go to Max or not. There's bigger Byers, Wheeler— both wearing one of bigger

Byers' t-shirts, a skirt hastily dragged up Wheeler's legs, jeans in the case of Byers. They're also pale and big eyed, lurking huddled together as Mrs Byers gets everyone inside and starts insisting they *all go to bed, back to bed, and that she'll take the day off work, and everyone should sleep for as long as they can, and "Max can sleep with El — if it's alright with you two?* of course it is and Billy— Billy— we do have a guest room. Well. We **will** have a guest room, but we don't have a bed set up right now— and it's full of boxes— so is it alright if you take the pullout in the lounge room?— Makes me glad Paul Christofferson left the ugly thing. We were talking about getting rid of it— it's good we didn't, I guess. Considering."

'That's— uh. That's fine,' he thinks he manages, but is soon distracted by Steve asking to use the phone so he can call himself a cab— 'Stay,' slips out, his hand going out, catching the brunet's wrist as the guy moves away from him. 'Stay. Please.'

'Um,' slips out between coral lips, then those brown eyes flick to Mrs Byers, 'Is that ok?'

'Of course it is Steve,' she says with a shaky smile. 'You're always welcome. You know you're always welcome— even when— well. No matter what's happening you can always stay here if you need to. Now! I will go and find some bedding, Will, honey, can you show Billy and Steve where the pullout is— I assume the two of you are ok sharing? If not— um—'

Steve opens his mouth, but before the brunet can suggest something horrible like sleeping in a different bed in a different part of the house he snaps, 'Of course we are.'

Mrs Byers scurries off, leaving them with little Byers, everyone else seeming to have evaporated back into the house. The kid leads them down the hallway towards the back of the house— It's a big house. He thinks, maybe, an old Victorian farmhouse with the farm long since sold off. There's a lot of polished wood and 1950s floral wallpaper— cheery stuff, if a bit— *feminine*— for his taste. That's all that's really keeping the place from tinging on the gothic— that, and the sense that this is a place that's been well loved, and somewhere people have been happy.

It's a different feel than anywhere he's ever lived.

It needs renovating though, the wood's all scratched and the polish flaking off, the wallpaper peeling— and there's stains up the top and on the ceiling— old cigarette smoke— and the floor creaks beneath threadbare carpet that really should be pulled up and replaced if the boards beneath aren't good enough to be polished and shown off, and the whole place smells strongly of old perfume even through the scent of new cleaning products— *Youth Dew* he thinks, because that's a scent that sure as shit will linger. Still—

It's a nice house.

'There's like, a *million* rooms—' little Byers is saying. 'It's in that room near the kitchen that none of us can work out what it's for— do you remember it Steve? The pullout I mean—'

'Not that flowery thing covered in plastic?' the brunet asks, face scrunching up. 'I thought it was just a sofa?'

'We all did until Nancy and Jonathan tried to move it and accidentally half pulled it out, or something. I don't know. I was in my room— all I heard was them shouting and then when we all rushed in Jonathan was nursing his hand, because he apparently freaked out and punched it, because it surprised him?'

There is a tiny pause, and then a muffled snort from Steve, who says — trying very hard to keep his face straight— 'Understandable. We are all easily startled after everything—'

He feels a little spike of vicious satisfaction at the amusement Steve's trying to hide. Obvious *contempt* would be better, but—

He deflates a little. It's jealousy. It was always jealousy— what Tommy *said*— His gaze darts to Steve's face. *Why?* Why would Tommy fucking H ever even *insinuate* that Steve would suck off a loser like Jonathan Byers? Why would Tommy H insinuate Steve would suck off any guy? Even if Steve is queer? It's *none* of Tommy H's business. *What the fuck is that asshole's problem?*

Anyway. He's pretty sure Steve isn't interested in bigger Byers, and

that's all he really *needs* to know. Yeah—

Yeah—

Because today's *Friday*. It's Friday— only—

The pullout in question is *intensely* floral, half wrapped in that clear plastic sheeting Jay's gram'ma wrapped every bit of furniture in her house in so it couldn't get *dirty*— and she'd glare at him or anyone else nearby when she said that.

Bitter, hateful old woman she was. Three things in life that woman liked. Herself, her fuck-ugly cat, Jay.

The rest of the sheeting has been sort of pulled off to lie in a sad little pile attached to the sofa, so the first thing they have to do is pull it the rest of the way off. It stinks of plastic and cigarettes, but on the plus side it's kept the pullout in really good condition, so he's got somewhere to sleep that's not all holes and moths and bedbugs or something.

The metal of the frame squeals as Steve gives a tug on it, protesting briefly before lurching open with a viciousness that makes them all flinch back instinctively. He glares at it. Making *him* look like an idiot too.

The mattress is in good condition though, still nice and firm— but not *too* firm— when he bounces a hand against it. It squeaks though. Squeaks—

His eyes flick over to Steve then back to the mattress. Probably a good thing that he hasn't. That they haven't. That they're *not*—

It would be *loud*, that's the thing. The whole house would hear.

Jesus. He's a fucking *pervert*.

After the night he's had— He's still looking at Steve and *wanting*.

How the *fuck* did he hide it from himself for so long?

Then Mrs Byers is back with a massive armful of bedding and Steve is

saying he can make the bed, and she's asking if he's sure, and Steve is insisting, so she hands him the bundle and tells them both to try and get some sleep, 'Come on Will, honey, you too—'

He catches little Byers' eyes as the kid leaves and thinks he sees something *considering* there, but now's not the time to deal with it. No. Now's the time to—

Help Steve make the bed, because the bundle Mrs Byers handed him turns out to be a tangle of pillows and sheets and a lightweight comforter that are all wrapped around each other and hard to wrangle. It's—

Well. He's making the bed to share it with Steve.

—

It's almost enough to distract him from everything that happened earlier.

—

When the bed's done he glances at the brunet, taking in the hastily done up jeans, the old faded t-shirt, the mess of the guy's hair. Hah. He's in bright blue hospital scrubs— and for a moment he's distracted hoping like hell he gets his leather jacket back from the cops. But it's summer. It's too hot to wear it—

Hot.

Suddenly he feels the heat. The cold he didn't realise had been clinging to him since he climbed in the car with Susan's unconscious body in the back melting away. 'Fuck,' he breathes out, scrubbing his hands through his sweaty curls, knowing he must look a complete *mess*.

What is he doing? How did he get to this point in time— He glances around the room, almost tripping over an ornate Victorian dining chair with a big hole in the seat cover that's right behind him. *Fuck*. There's other bits of unmatching furniture in here, old stuff mainly, and some boxes. It seems like a room the Byers— and Hoppers, or whatever— don't know what to do with, full of stuff they don't know

what to do with—

‘Pink velvet curtains, who would want pink velvet curtains—’ Steve is muttering to himself, going over and examining one of the floor length drapes, before grabbing it and pulling it aside enough to expose— ‘Oh wow. Billy, you’ve got to come see these windows!’

He comes around to the brunet’s side and stares at the ornate stained glass revealed. A women with long, red hair swirling all around her, wearing a clingy blue dress and holding a pair of birds, all these flowers and shit behind her— ‘*Pre-Raphaelite*—’ Steve breathes. ‘*Good Pre-Raphaelite*. Oh my God, my Grandad would *love* this— Do you think it’s original to the house? What’s it even *doing here*, in *Hawkins*— Jesus. Wow— He would pay, like, *thousands* for it if it is— I bet it looks even *better* in the day, with sunlight coming through it—’

And it’s so hard not to lean in, kiss Steve. *So hard*. Instead he clears his throat and says, ‘I need a smoke. You know the way to the backyard?’

Steve nods, ‘I think I need one too— It’s been. Wow. One hell of a night—’

‘Sorry,’ he says, reflexively, and then winces. Confidence, yeah? *What* confidence? All of a sudden he feels small. Sunken in on himself.

‘*Don’t be sorry*,’ the brunet rushes to say. ‘Never— Jesus Billy. Any time, *any time ever*, you need my help, I want you to call me, ok? No matter what it is— but especially something like this. Something—’

Steve trails off, looking at him with big, dark eyes. Soft eyes. And he has no idea what that look means and he can’t bear it, whatever it is, right now, so he deflects back to going outside for that smoke, fetching Gauloises and Zippo from his jacket and then following Steve through the darkened house and out the back door.

51. Chapter 51

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for discussions of domestic/family violence and child abuse, as well as contemplating murder, mentions of past suicide, and some existential angst and body horror. Please tell me if I missed any.

Here we are, Billy and Steve getting closer... I hope you all enjoy this chapter, and thanks so much for the comments and kudos, you're all amazing! Stay safe out there.

In the early dawn half-light the backyard is an overgrown mess. Weeds and long grass and roses gone wild and brambling everywhere. He thinks he sees the outline of old vegetable beds, old flower beds, maybe a chicken run— but it's hard to pick out the details in the wildness that's been left to grow.

There is, however, an old swing set in the small patch of clear ground — which is where they head. After testing it to make sure it's not rusted through he sits on one of the swings, offering the pack of cigarettes to Steve before taking one for himself, lighting the brunet's first and then his own. He breathes in the smoke, looks up at the moon still visible in the lightening sky— it's not full yet, almost three-quarters there. Heavy looking in the sky, *bloated*.

He hears Steve take a breath, then the words 'Are you ok? You told me about Max, her mom, but— Did he— Did he hurt *you*?' slip from the brunet hesitantly.

It's hard looking into that face, earnest and open and *caring*. Jesus this stuff is *intense*. He breathes out his lungful of smoke and shrugs, 'Tried to. Didn't let him—'

'God, Billy—' Steve breathes.

'I still want to kill him,' he says before he realises he's going to. 'I feel

like I could. Like— when I'm, you know, a *monster*— I could just hunt him down, would know *how* to, and it's be easy. Jesus, *Stevie*, it's be so *easy*—' He flicks ash onto the bare ground beneath the swing, '*Monster* is right, isn't it? I mean. He's my *dad*— and I know how I should feel. I should feel *guilty*, like it's all my own fault— because that's the way I've always felt, deep down. Used to piss me off. Make me do stupid shit. I never wanted to feel like— but I couldn't help it, you know?— and now it's like I can feel where those thoughts should be, but they're not there. They're not. And—' and he didn't even know he felt like that, thought like that, but as the words slip out he realises that, yeah, this is what he thinks, underneath all the reacting to the moment and the emptiness.

'And he's my *dad*— I used to want him to love me. Be *proud* of me— but I *don't*, not anymore. It's like—' another lungful of smoke, thinking how to put it, '—when I became that *thing*, the first time, all the *human* left got driven out of me— Or maybe before that. Maybe when the fucking *Mind Flayer* got me. Or when that other me— all those *memories*. All that shit I got wrong—' and for a moment he almost tells Steve the truth. Tells Steve everything he remembers from the last time around, everything up to the point where he *died*, but in the end he doesn't. There's enough fucked up that's happened in this life, no need to upset the brunet—

'I killed that doctor, remember, and I still don't care. I don't *care*. Surely I gotta care, at least a bit, somewhere inside. But I *don't*, and I kind of think it'd be the same with Neil. I could rip his fucking head off and I wouldn't grieve, I wouldn't— because I'm a *monster*, a monster—'

And then Steve's wrapped around him again, all that sweet warmth, and that *scent*, and the words, 'You're not a monster. You're *not*— Fuck your dad. Who cares if he dies? *He's* the monster— He could have killed *you*, Max— he tried to kill her *mom*— Billy you saved them. *You saved them*— never feel bad for saving them. Never feel bad— You don't have to feel bad. You *shouldn't* feel bad— it's good. It's *so good* you don't care what he thinks. I'm *glad* you don't care what he thinks. He doesn't *get to make you feel bad*, I won't *let him*— you're so good. So good. You *saved them*—'

Oh.

Oh wow.

Before he lets himself think about it he's got both his arms wrapped around Steve and has all but dragged the poor guy into his lap. 'Uh,' he feels the brunet breathe out, then, 'Billy—' hesitantly.

'You—' he breathes against Steve's neck, face buried in all that mess of hair, '—are the best person I have ever known and I am so fucking sorry I was such a massive *dick* to you when we first met, because you never, ever, *ever* deserved it, and I'm so fucking *grateful* you've given me a chance, because I sure as hell haven't done anywhere near enough to *earn* it.'

He's gotta tell Steve how he feels. He's gotta make this official— it's just — *later*. It's all too much now. Too hard.

He's so *tired*. All of a sudden, like whatever it was keeping him awake — the panic, the anger — it's all draining out of him.

'Come on,' the brunet's saying, voice gentle. 'Billy, you gotta get some sleep. You won't— I mean. In the *morning*, or I guess, *later* in the morning— you'll feel more like yourself.'

'-kay,' he manages, flicking the butt of his cigarette off into the bushes when Steve pulls him to his feet and starts ushering him back into the house. '*Thank you*, for coming to the hospital, for— *for all of it*.'

'Of course,' Steve says, and he sees that pretty face twitch in his direction before turning away, and he thinking the brunet looks a bit red in the blue tinted light, but isn't sure if he's seeing things right. 'I'm— I guess. Um— *Billy*, you gotta know that whatever's happening I want to help you, in any way I can. I mean, I— I'm— *happy* to—' he wonders why the brunet's voice almost tapers off by the end. Maybe Steve's shy?

Hm.

Shy's never been something he found overly sexy, always preferred the girls he's been with to know what they want and have no shame in going after it, but maybe with Steve— *yeah*. It could be hot—

One track Goddamn mind Hargrove— What the fuck is wrong with him. After everything that's happened—

But *Steve*—

The brunet is such a fucking *distraction*. Maybe he needs a distraction. Maybe it's better letting himself get tangled up in the *want* he's been feeling for so long and not acknowledging than thinking about what his dad has done—

Tomorrow. Well, *later*— later he'll talk to the guy, ask him out or whatever he needs to do— there's no way Steve would be sweet like this, let *him* get away with grabbing the brunet like that, if he wasn't interested.

Hah.

In twenty-four hours he might actually have a *boyfriend*.

Fucking hell.

Jesus fucking *Christ*.

His life has gotten fucking *fucked up* since he came to Hawkins.

—

He doesn't regret it though.

With Steve by his side the next few days might even be bearable—

He hesitates at the back porch, glancing out into the wildness of the garden. He goes inside, goes to sleep, and he's going to have to wake up in a world where Max might lose her mom— and for all he's ever thought bad about Susan, she was a real badass at the end there, trying to throw Neil out of the house. He thinks maybe he was wrong about her. Fuck. He hopes he gets a chance to really get to know her. He hopes there's a *her* left to get to know, that Neil hasn't just *annihilated* her, like the man does all the good things, all the joy, in the world— and then he'll have to deal with Max's dad— who he punched in the face— and whatever happens with Neil— and the *town*. Smallminded little town— and it'll be all over everywhere by

lunch time— and

A gentle tug on his arm, Steve looking at him in concern— Holy shit. This is some fucking *uncharted territory*. He steps forward, back into the house.

‘Sorry about this,’ is what Steve says, back in the room with the pullout, after stripping off his jeans and standing there, looking a little awkward, in t-shirt and bright red briefs. *Red— fucking— red rag to a bull*. The brunet fills them out *nicely*. Big dick, *nice ass* too he realises, usually so distracted by the front side of the other guy he forgets about the back. ‘I could always go and try and borrow some pyjamas from Jonathan—?’

It takes him a moment to realise the brunet is offering to *put more clothes on*— ‘No!’ he yelps, then, trying to play it cool, ‘He’s probably asleep—’

‘Yeah,’ Steve nods. ‘And Nancy will be with him— yeah— um. As long as you’re ok with it?’

‘With you in your briefs?’ he asks, then, when the brunet nods, instead of saying something about it *being even better if Steve took them off*, he says, ‘You remember the last time we shared a bed?’

He almost thinks Steve flinches, but that can’t be right. The brunet does blush though, almost as red as his briefs. ‘Um— Uh. *Yeah*. Ok. Yeah— You want to get the light, or should I?’

‘I’ll do it,’ he replies, lingering a little to watch the other guy carefully climb into the bed, not looking at him.

Steve’s like a new bride on her wedding night—

One track mind.

Jesus.

He needs to just— *not*.

Fuck. Is he really going to sleep in hospital scrubs? Before going and getting the light he strips off the blue top, leaving it draped over the

back of that Victorian chair from earlier.

Once he's flipped the old fashioned switch by the closed door he makes his way over to the bed by the small amount of light filtering in through the moth holes in those velvet curtains, lifting the covers and sliding in next to Steve. He hears the brunet gasp. Feels the warmth of him, close, *so close*— but he doesn't reach out. Doesn't touch.

There, in the dark, everything comes back again. The full weight of reality sinking back down to crush him, distraction fading away. 'I should be out there,' he breathes, 'I should be *hunting* him—' the thought brings a lance of fire across his face, across his *scars*. Then, a moment later, the rest begin to burn. '*He can't get away with it.*'

'He won't,' Steve breathes out, the mattress shaking beneath them as the brunet turns onto his side to face him, even though neither of them can see the other's face.

He wants to stay here, in this moment— well. Maybe not *this* one. Maybe the moment that'd happen if he reached out and pulled Steve close, maybe closed his mouth over the brunet's and shoved his hands under those bright red briefs— But even thinking about it he doesn't quite *feel* it. His dick's still soft. It's a *dream*— It's anything other than thinking about what's happened.

'I *should* kill him,' he sighs, rubbing his hands roughly across his face. He *wants to*. That's the thing. He wants to— and it'd get rid of Neil. Neil would no longer be a *problem*.

'I— uh,' Steve fidgets a little, beside him, and he wishes he could see the guy properly. Look at his face. Try and work out what the brunet is thinking— *This really is not a normal conversation*. He hopes he's not scaring Steve or something— but then, Steve's used to this shit, isn't he? Steve's life isn't a normal life.

A little more fidgeting and suddenly there's a warm hand hesitantly placed on his upper arm. 'I— I don't think you should, Billy. Um. Not necessarily because he doesn't deserve to have something bad happen to him, *he does*, but because—' the brunet trails off again, goes to pull that hand back, but before the guy can he's got his own hand

covering it, holding it in place. Steve's fingers are warm. Trembling a little— and Steve is still talking, 'You. Um. You said, earlier, that you think you could kill him and not care— but what if that changes? Sometimes things only bother us as we get older— I don't want him to be able to hurt you, in any way.'

'I can't just let him get away with it—' he reiterates. It's important. He *can't*. And there's the anger again, making his muscles tense, making his body *burn*— His hand drops from where it's holding Steve's on his arm— but the brunet is talking again.

'It's not— Hopper will get him. Max, her mom, *you*— you'll have justice. Hopper will make sure of it— and your dad— *everyone* will know what he is—'

'And if he gets off?' he snaps, then softens his voice, Not Steve's fault. *Never* Steve's fault— 'You hear it all the time, people doing fucked up shit and the courts just letting them get away with it—'

There is a long pause, Steve's hand very still, *lead*, on his arm, then the brunet gives him a gentle squeeze and says, 'If that does happen — Maybe, in that situation— maybe then you will be the only way to get justice. But let the law try first. *Please*—'

Hah. He doesn't know what to do— He thinks of Max's injured face, of Susan lying there surrounded by tubes and machines, of Uncle Harry— coming home and *finding Uncle Harry*— and his dad had to have known the man needed help. Needed something other than Neil *needling him* all the time about being crazy— he thinks of his mom His dad hitting her, *hurting her*, driving her away— and then he thinks of every time he can remember his dad turning on him. All of it. The words. The beatings. Being hit out of *nowhere*—

But maybe Steve is right. Maybe there'll come a time when he's older, when all of it is so far behind him, that he'd regret it if he killed the old bastard— though he can never imagine thinking Neil deserved *better*. But in every story he's ever heard no good comes to anyone who kills their father—

Ok. Ok. 'Ok,' he sighs. As resigned to the idea as he thinks he's ever going to get.

After that they lie there in silence for a while. He feels— fuck. The longer he lies there the more *exhausted* he feels, but it's that kind of exhaustion where sleep's somewhere far away. A foreign country.

He has no idea what Steve's thinking.

After a while the brunet says, 'You really should try to sleep.'

'Yeah,' he agrees. Still staring up at the shadowed ceiling.

It occurs to him to wonder if he does whether he'll wake up in Steve's backyard— though he hasn't, not since the weekend— or whether he'll wake up wherever it is his dad's holed up, covered in blood and surrounded by a wreckage that used to be the man—

Fear.

Not of— *that*. No. Fear of what will happen to Steve lying so innocently beside him if he becomes a monster in his sleep. '*Shit!*' he hisses, sitting up.

'What?' he feels the brunet shift beside him, sees the form of him in the faint light as Steve sits up too.

'What if I turn into that *thing* in the night and go after him? I keep waking up in the forest—'

A pause, then Steve is reaching for him, and he's not sure what's happening or *why* it's happening, but the next thing he knows he's lying on his side with Steve wrapped around him from behind, and the brunet is saying 'I'll be here. I'll wake you if— I'll wake you.'

And it's *ridiculous*. Because of the two of them surely *he* should be the bigger spoon. He's the more— Well. He's the *manlier* one, if it comes down to it. And it's not like he needs to be *comforted*, exactly, or at least not *held* like he's a kid or something, but— Because it's *Steve*, it's Steve and he's— well *Steve*. Not the best fighter, but *brave*— fuck he's brave.

Brave—

And for a moment he almost feels *safe* in the brunet's arms.

52. Chapter 52

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER VWARNING: for mentions of domestic violence (from more than one quarter. I'm looking at you, Lonnie) and child abuse, as well as fear of homophobia as well as some other homophobic themes.

As always thank you all so much for sticking with this story, and for the comments and kudos, I hope you enjoy this chapter too! Stay safe out there.

A noise wakes him. He blinks, bringing the world back into focus. At some time while they were sleeping he's rolled onto his back and Steve has shifted in close so the brunet is sleeping with his head on his shoulder, his own arm wrapped around the guy to hold him in place—

The noise comes again. It's— he sits up, just a little, not enough to disturb Steve, and sees the door's open, sees a figure lurking in the doorway— 'Max?'

She darts inside the room, pushing the door shut behind her, then pads over to the bed and as she does the stronger light of day filtering in the moth holes of the curtains lets him catch a glimpse of her face.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Chief Hopper better fucking catch Neil or—

'Can I—?' she whispers— sounding a little clearer that the night before— eying the bed beside him, careful not to wake Steve.

He grunts an affirmation and lifts the sheet, holding it up as she slips into the bed next to him, stealing what used to be his pillow and resting her head on it. 'I can'd sleebe on my side,' she whines. 'This sugks Billy, oh my God this sugks. My face *hurts*—'

‘You need me to go get your pills from Mrs Byers?’ he asks.

She shakes her head a little then winces. ‘Lader. I had a nighdmare and I jus’ wanna be here for a bid—’

‘El?’ he asks. Shouldn’t the other girl be more of a comfort than he is?

A tiny pause, then. ‘I dreambed he killed you.’

‘He didn’t,’ he says, taking her hand in his, ‘I’m still right here.’

Another pause, then a tiny sob. ‘Mom’s gonna be ogkay, isn’ she?’

Not knowing if he’s lying or not he still ends up saying, ‘Of course she is. Susan— Susan, she’s a *fighter*. She’ll pull through—’ and then, ‘You had to get it from somewhere, kid.’

She cries a little after that, before falling into a fitful sleep. He holds her hand, keeps his other one curled around Steve, tries to sleep as well—

‘Oh!’ he hears a little noise, opens his eyes again, sees Mrs Byers peering into the room.

Fuck. His eyes flick to Steve— that brunet head still resting on his chest— and back to Mrs Byers. She gives him a small, sweet smile, and then creeps into the room, loudly whispering, ‘Jim just got back if you want to talk to him? I’ve got some coffee on if you want some, and Jonathan’s making breakfast— after that it might be time to get back to the hospital and see how Max’s mom is doing, do you think?’

Why isn’t she judging him? Because she’s not. She’s acting like seeing two guys entwined together in a bed is perfectly *normal*—

Ok. Play it cool Hargrove, ‘What time is it?’

‘Almost *ten*, can you believe it?’ is her reply, ‘I think we must have all been really tired when we got back. Do you want eggs? Or toast? I think we have some oatmeal if that would be better?’

‘Eggs are fine,’ he replies even though he knows they won’t be anywhere as good as something Steve could cook.

She nods, eyes flickering over the three of them, and then another smile— almost *approving*? Fuck knows if he's reading her right— and she says, 'I'll let you wake them up,' before creeping back the way she came.

He hesitates, just for a moment, before deciding it's probably best to wake up Steve first— maybe Max didn't notice earlier? But even if she didn't, she's sure to notice now— and he doesn't really want to risk her deciding that the gays are actually *not* okay when there's more important things for her to be worrying about.

The problem with waking up Steve is that it means Steve is going to *move*, is going to sit up, is going to stop resting against him in his arms— and the brunet is a nice armful. He kind of wishes they were more entangled, but other than the head resting on his shoulder and the arms curled up in the space between them— and his own arm wrapped under and around the other guy— their legs are lying separately— It's not like the last time, Steve *on top of him*—

He strokes Steve's shoulder with the hand attached to the arm wrapped around the brunet, then gives him a gentle shake. 'Come on. Time to wake up.'

The brunet grunts, that pretty face scrunches up, then nuzzles against his chest as the guy tries to hide from reality. 'Come on Stevie,' he says, voice soft— and *fuck* he sounds as besotted as he feels— 'Wakey wakey, rise and shine.'

Another grunt, then brown eyes blink open and Steve mumbles his name, before lurching upright, hand going straight to his mouth to wipe away the— *huh*. Steve was *drooling* on him in his sleep. There's a little puddle of it on his chest. His own hand goes there, not so much rubbing it off as rubbing it *in*. 'Sorry!' the brunet blurts.

'It's—' he very carefully does not raise his hand to his mouth and taste Steve's spit. Because that would be *weird*— and creepy and *gross*. 'It's fine. Yeah.'

'Billy'— and that's Max waking up.

He looks over to her, 'Hey shitbird,' he says, almost choking on the

affection he feels for her. Jesus. Her face looks even *worse* now than it did earlier. ‘Mrs Byers has got coffee on and *Jonathan*—’ wow, he really can’t say the guy’s name normally, can he? He hopes the irritation he feels even thinking of bigger Byers and Steve being in the same house isn’t showing too much, ‘—is apparently making *eggs*.’

She makes an incoherent, congested kind of noise and sits up, looking tired and crappy and bruised to all shit, still she smiles when she sees Steve— even if it becomes a grimace of pain halfway through— and says, ‘Hey! Sdebe! *Did you sleeep well?!*’ with all kinds of meaning behind it he can’t begin to untangle.

‘Uh,’ the brunet glances from Max to him and back again, then gives a little shrug. ‘Yeah? Did you? When did you get in here anyway? I’m sure you were with El when we— um—’ Steve glances at him again, ‘— went to sleep.’

‘Nighdmare,’ she says with a shrug, then throws back the covers and climbs out of the bed to an accompanying squeal of springs. ‘Come on, I wan’ eggs.’

‘And some pain pills,’ he tells her, ‘I saw that wince Maxine. You go tell Mrs Byers to give you some—’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ she says, flapping a hand at him dismissively as she heads to the door. ‘You dtwo combing?’

He’s still not sure of his way around this house so he lets Max and Steve lead the way to the kitchen. He’s pretty sure they’re leading him in the right direction, because he hears the Chief’s voice saying, ‘They’re in there, *together?*’

And then a moment later Mrs Byers’ reply of, ‘You don’t have a problem with Nancy and Jonathan—’ which breaks off as they enter the kitchen into ‘Max! Oh honey, look at your nose— I’ve got the pills the doctor prescribed in my bag, I’ll just go get you one, ok? Will, can you pour Max some juice? You want juice with it? They can be bitter— I remember when— um— My arm got broken— and I used to hate taking them because they were bitter— and I couldn’t think properly, and Lonnie would say—’

The woman trails off, sort of muttering to herself, as she scurries out of the room in search of her bag. It's a big kitchen— old fashioned, like the rest of the house, and probably installed in the 50s or 60s from the look of everything— little Byers is doing what his mom asked, getting a glass of juice, bigger Byers is over by the stove, frying up some eggs, and the Chief is standing by the kitchen table with a funny look on his face. In fact they've all kind of got funny looks on their faces— though different kinds of funny looks. Little Byers looks almost smug, bigger Byers looks uncomfortable, and the Chief looks— that one is really beyond him.

'You catch my asshole of an old man?' he asks, eying the man. An uncomfortable grimace comes across the man's face. 'So, *no*?' he asks, before the guy can say anything. Jesus. Fucking *pigs*. He at least thought this one was a bit less *useless* than most cops, but maybe he was wrong—

'There have been some developments,' is what the man says after a moment. 'I'm going to need to ask you a few more questions— but after we've eaten. How are those eggs going Jonathan?'

'Ah— Almost ready,' bigger Byers splutters.

'You want coffee?' the Chief asks, going to the pot.

Both he and Steve nod— and Max, but the man seems to ignore her when he's getting out cups and pouring out the coffee. 'Cream? Sugar?' They both nod again, accepting the cups when the man hands them over.

A moment later Mrs Byers is scurrying back into the room— followed by El— in her pyjamas— and Wheeler— in what is obviously yesterday's clothing. 'Here you go honey,' Mrs Byers says, plopping a pill into Max's hand and watching her swallow it. 'How are those eggs going Jonathan?'

'They're ready!' the guy snaps, scurrying to push them from the pan onto the waiting plates beside some toast.

Mrs Byers grabs for the plates, handing one to him and Max and Steve and then shooing them to the kitchen table before making sure

everyone else has something to eat— and of course El wants Eggos and not eggs, and the Chief gets involved, going on about *healthy diets* etc—

He grabs Steve gently by the arm and guides him to a seat beside the one he's chosen for his own, *looking* at Max until she sits on his other side, then glaring at bigger Byers and Wheeler in case they think they're allowed to sit at the empty head of the table next to Steve— and then little Byers takes the seat so he can relax and manage a bite of his— disappointingly not *horrible*— eggs until suddenly it sounds like someone is trying to knock down the door. Mrs Byers scurries off to deal with it— and a moment later the sound of Squawky and the rest of the terrible children tells him what exactly is going on.

'Where's Max?!' a voice demands— Sinclair? And a moment later it's just—

Chaos.

Shitty children everywhere having hysterics about Max's face— even *Erica* has come with her brother, and the brother in question looks like he's about to have a nervous breakdown and has started going on about killing Neil— and then Steve's out of his seat trying to calm them all down— and they're all squawking louder than he thinks he's ever heard anyone squawk and demanding to know the exact *details* of what happened— and now Max is out of her seat, trying to play it cool— but he can see the way she's huddled near Sinclair and the way the kid is fussing about her so gently and—

'Come on, let's finish this outside and have that chat,' the Chief is saying to him. 'I have got to get away from these annoying teenagers before I go completely *insane*.'

He agrees, picking up his plate and his cup of coffee and following the man into the back yard. The two of them ending up sitting on the swings like Steve and he did earlier— even though it's kind of ridiculous to see a man of the Chief's age doing it.

'You ever heard of Junie McGuiggan?' the Chief asks between bites of toast and eggs.

‘Nope,’ is his answer, before something nags at him— ‘Wait— Mc— isn’t Neil’s boss’ name something like that? Scottish or Irish or some shit—’

The Chief makes a humming noise. ‘Your dad ever do anything to make you think he was having an affair?’

He snorts. ‘He was *always* having an affair— or at least cheating on whoever he was with— He sleeping with this Mc-whatever chick?’

A tiny shrug. ‘We’re not sure yet. We think so—’ a tiny pause, the man putting his fork full of eggs down to look at him seriously. ‘Look, Billy, I gotta tell you that your dad has skipped town— now we *are* going to find him, I *promise you*, but it might take a couple of days. We’ve got an APB out for him and— I might as well tell you. We went to speak to his boss and the guy’s wife— as you told me, the last people to see him before he came home last night— we wanted to get a gauge on his mood, if anything seemed to be bothering him — Well. The boss’s wife is now missing as well, and she’s the accountant out at McGuiggan’s Processing, and it looks like there’s some *financial irregularities*—’

‘Are you telling me my dad and this woman were having an affair and also *embezzling* from her *husband*?’ Wow. *Classic Neil bullshit.*

The Chief shrugs again. ‘We don’t know for sure, but it’s— it’s looking *likely*. Does— Look— Does this sound like the kind of thing your dad would do?’ the man almost looks nervous when he says it, as if it’s somehow going to offend him.

‘*Absolutely*,’ he snorts out a laugh. ‘Jesus I can’t believe that poor woman fell for whatever bullshit he sold her. Some sob story probably— *Jesus*.’

The Chief *looks* at him for a moment, before nodding, decisive. ‘Here’s me thinking I was going to have to tell you not to be too— too— I hate to say it, acknowledge it, and yeah, again, we are *men*— but *hurt* by everything your dad’s done. That he’s a piece of shit that never deserved kids. That you’re *ten times the man* he ever was— but you’ve got that already all figured out, haven’t you? Jesus. Wish I was half so wise when I was your age.’

What the hell is he supposed to say to that? He thinks maybe he's actually *blushing*— and it's hard as hell to meet the man's eyes suddenly. Fortunately he's saved from the awkward moment when the Chief waves a pack of camels under his nose and they both give away finishing their food in favour of lighting up. Smoking in silence together for a minute like a pair of men and not—

People with emotions.

Eventually the cop asks him some more questions— mainly about if he has any idea where Neil might go and if the guy has *anyone*, anyone at all he might go to— any *family*— other *women*—

But he can't help. His dad just— *alienates* everyone, eventually.

'Ok, ok—' the Chief says on a lungful of smoke. 'We will catch him. Being in there, looking at that poor kid's— *Max's* face— And what he did to her mom, his *wife*—' the man shakes his head. 'I'm gonna hunt him down and *drag him* in front of a judge if I have to. That stuff— this is *my town*— that stuff is *not ok*. Not in *my town*.'

53. Chapter 53

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For domestic/family violence and child abuse, and mentions of female objectification. Please let me know if I missed any.

This chapter is both late and short, I'm afraid. Sorry everyone. I've been having a bit of trouble working out how to divide this bit of the fic, for reasons that'll get obvious in a few chapters' time. I'm not sure where I'll end up dividing the next one, and whether it'll be long or short, but I'll be posting it in only a couple of days time, so there's that if nothing else. Thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and kudos, I really do appreciate it!

Before they go to the hospital they stop off at home— *home*. Hah. There's police tape over the door. It's not home, it's a fucking *crime scene*— to get some clothes and shit to stay with the Byers for some undetermined amount of time.

He'd object. Declare he doesn't want their *charity*— but looking at Max with El— looking at Max with Mrs Byers— He thinks it's probably for the best. Anyway, who knows how long it'll be for.

Part of the uncertainty is the question of when Max's dad will arrive, part of it is when Susan will wake up, part of it is when Neil will be caught, part of it is what happens to the house when he *is*—

Fuck it's an ugly house. Looking at it— 'You stay out here with Mrs Byers, El and Sinclair,' he tells Max. He does not want her in there. He remembers the *blood*. 'Tell me what you want and I'll get it.'

She argues, of course, but both Mrs Byers and the Chief— who has followed along in his truck to escort them through the *crime scene*— take his side so she gives up.

'I'll help,' Steve says, when he starts towards the house after the

Chief, doing his best to remember everything she said. He's sure he'll forget *something* and have her bitching at him later.

He glances at Steve, sees concern, sees all that *helpfulness*— 'Sure. Ok — *sure*.'

When they get inside the house the brunet hesitates, and he can see those brown eyes as they seem almost instinctively drawn to the living room, to where Susan went down, to the splatter of Max's blood across the wall— those eyes flick back to him, full of *sympathy*.

'I'd better get Max's stuff,' he says after a moment trapped in that velvety brown gaze. She'd probably smack him if she thought he'd let another guy get a look at her panties— even if it is only Steve. She'd probably smack *him* for looking at them if it wasn't for the fact he's seen them when her mom hangs them on the line— and didn't she used to just bitch and whine about that all the time back at the start. Anyway, by now she should know he's got no interest in her underthings—

Hell. Right now he's pretty much got no interest in *any* girl's underthings—

Steve nods. 'You *are* her brother— Do you want me to get started packing yours?'

He doesn't bother correcting the brunet about Max being his *stepsister*. She might as well be his sister— for all it ties her to Neil's *shitty* blood. 'Yeah. I've got a duffel in the top of the closet— shove as many jeans and shirts and shit into it as you can. Don't worry too much about what they look like, being *pretty* isn't exactly my priority right now.'

There's a moment— heavy kind of moment. He doesn't know what it means— but then the Chief is snorting and he's reminded that the man is here, with them. When he glances over the cop gives him this oh-so-*innocent* look and says, 'I'm gonna go check out your dad's room, see if anyone missed anything. Shout out when you're ready to go.'

They split up. He grabs Max's duffel bag out of her own closet and

packs her stuff as quick as he can, doing his best not to forget too much. When he's done he goes to find Steve, stepping into his room to find the brunet standing still, bag half-packed in front of him, eyes on—

He follows that gaze. Ah. The *tit wall*. All those posters covering the hole he tore through the dry wall. He clears his throat, uncomfortable.

Steve seems— Yeah. *Civilised*. The kind of guys other guys make jokes about, you know, happy to cut his balls off to make nice to girls— The brunet is probably not impressed by what is, on reflection, something of a shrine to *female objectification*.

'Oh! Billy—' the brunet glances at him, away, back at the posters, then down at the bag— 'You done packing Max's stuff? I— Um— I have packed some of yours but— I guess— I mean, I know you said to just pack *whatever* but I wasn't sure—'

He shrugs. 'Whatever you have's fine. I can always come back and get other stuff—' he reaches out, takes the bag from the brunet, has a glance inside— Yep. Jeans and shirts— all stuff he's happy to wear. He takes over after that, getting a few more things from the closet, and then packing socks, sleeping pants, some briefs— probably should get used to wearing them if he's going to be sharing a house with a handful of girls he's not related to and an overprotective Chief of Police— his colognes, his hairspray, his comb— He gets a look at himself in the mirror and winces.

He looks like a sack of sweaty shit. Hair's a mess. Facial hair's a mess. He looks like he's had about three minute's sleep— and, yeah, *sweaty* —

At least he's out of the hospital scrubs— though what he is wearing doesn't quite fit him. A bit long and a bit *tight*. The dark jeans and faded grey t-shirt belonged to *Lonnie*— whoever the fuck that is— because bigger Byers hadn't wanted to lend him anything— with the excuse it wouldn't fit right— and the Chief's clothes would have been all around *too big*— and it was all starting to get ridiculous and argumentative but then Mrs Byers said she had some stuff that might fit and that she'd never gotten around to getting rid of them in case

they were *useful*—

There'd been more shouting and shit then, but he'd tuned out, because Byers family bullshit is not his number one concern.

He catches a look at Steve reflected in the mirror, sees the brunet looking at him with a *strange* expression— and then those brown eyes flick away and back to the wall of posters before Steve looks at the floor. *What*—?

His attention is dragged away by the sound of voices, whining voices. Max. She wants to get to the hospital to see her mom— Shit. Yeah. Better hurry up.

He's got all he needs from in here so he grabs a couple of the shopping bags he got when he went shopping with little Byers and hurries to the bathroom, grabbing his haircare stuff and soap and his razor— then *Max's* haircare stuff and soap and *her* razor and all the shit in jars and tubes she's started accumulating in the last couple of years— He can hear her carrying on out there, hear the Chief bellowing for him and Steve—

Ok. Ok. Ok— *Done*.

He darts out of the bathroom to find Steve in the hall, holding both duffle bags, and it's so easy to just walk in close to the brunet and place a hand low down on the guy's back to guide him out of the house and towards all the noise. Steve goes easily too—

Steve *lets him*.

Then they all have to be packed back into Mrs Byers car for the trip to the hospital— Steve in the front seat— which kind of annoys him, because he wants the guy in the back, next to him, but the back seat's already got him and Max and El and Sinclair— who refuses to leave Max's side— and that's at least one too many kids back here. Max and El are sharing a seatbelt— and he's pretty sure that is *not* safe, but—

Whatever. They get into a crash and he'll go *monster* and protect them both.

*When did that thought become so **normal**?*

54. Chapter 54

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING; For discussions of racism, also for domestic/family violence, and child abuse, please let me know if I missed any.

So I decided to split it into the shorter chapters, based around the content of each part. Here we finally have Billy talking to Lucas about **that** night. I'm going to do my best to stick to my posting schedule for the chapters left before hiatus, but for the next two weeks I will be busy, and since people can finally travel locally here again there are going to be guests around constantly, so I may have trouble getting time. I'm hoping for the best though. Thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and kudos! I'm sorry of this is a bit rushed, I'm just grabbing time to do it while I can. I hope you enjoy!

At the hospital he and Max are allowed in to see Susan again— and it's horrible. She's still out of it— she still looks like Neil *killed her*— even though the doctor says they're really pleased with her progress and that they think they might even be able to bring her around out of sedation earlier than they'd anticipated— Not today though.

Max wants to be able to spend a bit of time with her mom alone— looking up at him like he'll *object*— of course not. 'Take all the time you need,' he tells her. His opinion of Susan might have taken a sudden revolution for the positive, but she still Max's mom, not *his*— and whatever closeness has been building between them is a more recent thing.

He wanders back into the hall to find Mrs Byers and El chatting, Sinclair staring in after Max with a worried look on his face, and Steve— 'He told me to tell you he went to see Heather,' Sinclair says after a moment of him looking around for the brunet.

Oh. *Heather*—

He keeps forgetting about her.

Jesus, he's a *dick*. How can he let himself forget about *Heather*?

He should go see her too, while Max is—

But his gaze catches on Sinclair, message delivered and attention back on waiting for his sister. *Fuck*. Ok. He has been *dodging* this, but —

'Can we talk?' he says, the words coming out stilted. 'You and me? Away from El and Mrs Byers?'

Dark eyes snap to his face. 'Why? You gonna try and beat me up again?' the kid asks.

Annoyance rises, but he pushes it back. *His fault. If the kid doesn't trust him it's his own damn fault*. 'Nah, man. I Just— I wanna clear the air. About everything.' Sceptical eyes meet his— '*Shit*. Kid. I want to apologize—' he manages to grit out.

Sinclair looks at him for a moment more, *judging him*, before the kid shrugs. 'Ok.'

Since he's not about to admit he's going to apologize to Sinclair to everyone— and because he doubts Mrs Byers will let the two of them just wander off— he tells her they're going to the diner to get something better than the shitty hospital coffee and asks if she wants some. She does. Apparently so does El— and after a moment's debate Mrs Byers concedes that she can, after how little sleep everyone got— and then he realises the Chief has fucked off too— '*Oh, he's gone back to the house for a couple of hours sleep, but don't worry. The rest of the Force is out there, looking for your dad—*' is what Mrs Byers says when he asks if the guy will be back soon and will want coffee too.

'Tell Steve where I've gone if he comes back and wants to know,' is the last thing he says before he leads Sinclair out of the hospital to his car, still parked in the carpark.

'If you decide to kill me and dump the body somewhere everyone

will know you were the last person to see me,' the kid tells him, before getting in the passenger side.

'I'm not going to kill you,' he sighs, fishing out a cigarette and lighting up before pulling out of the carpark. 'At least not today.'

Silence falls between them. He really should say something but now the moment's here it feels— *Fuck. It feels so fucking awkward.* Eventually he manages to blurt out something about being sorry for attacking the kid *that night*.

Sinclair *looks* at him for a moment, then nods. 'I get that— except I never got what it was about in the first place. Would you have attacked any boy Max was hanging out with, or was it because I'm *black*? That's what I used to think— I used to think you were just another racist piece of shit, blond and blue-eyed, looking like a Nazi poster boy and the kind of guy who's secretly got a white hood in the back of his closet—' the kid sighs, glances out of the window, 'But I've seen you with *Erica*. You *like* Erica— and I'm sometimes not even sure our *parents* like Erica— So. I don't get it.'

Oh wow does he not want to have to talk about any of this— But. But, but, but— Honestly, deep down, the Sinclair kid isn't a bad kid— Ok, yeah, looks at Max's ass— but *not a bad kid*— and if he thinks about it too long the whole thing makes him feel sick and guilty and— look. Maybe his mom was Catholic, and maybe her parents were Catholic, but it's not like *he* is— Neil never let him set foot inside a Catholic church, and he hasn't grown up with all of the — *all of it*— so it's not like he's the kind of guy that wants to *wallow in guilt*.

Confession though— maybe there's something to *that*. Maybe it's better to confess and get it over with.

'You're right,' he says, wincing as the words escape. 'It was because you were black—' He imagines how Amy would look at him if she ever found out. Yeah. He has been a real shitty guy— but he's trying to make that all in the past.

He hears the kid suck in a breath. Sees the *misery* there— ah. Shit.

'Look, kid— What happened was *my* fault. No one's fault but *mine*,

and when I say what I'm about to say I'm not trying to escape responsibility or some shit. I *did not* have to do what I did, you get that—?' The kid nods, hesitantly. Ok. O— '—By now I think you pretty much know how much of a piece of shit my dad is? Yeah, well on top of wife— and *kid*— beater, you *can* add *racist*— and I knew, I just *knew* if he found out about you and Max he'd—' he trails off, remembering what his dad has already done.

'So you were trying to protect her?' the kid asks, hesitantly.

He shrugs. 'Yeah, I was— in my fucked up awful kind of way. But that *doesn't make it alright*— The fact that I thought I was trying to protect her from my *dad's* racism doesn't mean I wasn't unconsciously being a racist piece of shit when I was doing it. I was. I was and I am *sorry* and I promise I will not do shit like that *ever again*— I mean, if you hurt her you're a dead man, but that's gonna be because you *hurt her*, and not because of anything else—'

There's a little pause, then, 'Ok. Ok, I *accept* your apology— But I haven't forgotten, ok? I haven't forgotten and *don't* do it again.'

That's about as much as he can hope for. 'I won't. I *promise*.'

The kid *looks* at him for a moment, before smirking, 'You *do* do something like that again, and I'll tell *Steve*.'

'He was there last time,' he points out. Not adding *and then I beat him half to hell and almost killed him— which is something I regret even more than how I treated you because I am pathetically in love with him*.

The kid shrugs, says, 'Yeah, but last time was before you cared about what he thought of you.'

For a moment he panics, wonders how much he's given away if even this kid he barely has much to do with has somehow worked out he *cares* about Steve— but then he decides he's just going to ignore it and everything it implies. The kid isn't acting grossed out or anything, just using Steve to guarantee his good behaviour.

When they get to the diner the kid decides he wants a milkshake instead of coffee— and there's none of this *I don't have any money, oh*

woe is me I can't afford all the sugar in the universe stuff, Sinclair looks at him expectantly and with the full knowledge *he's* the one paying— Jesus the kid looks like Erica right then— and then orders the most disgustingly sweet combination of flavours he's ever seen anyone order in his life. 'Better get one for Max and El too,' the kid suggests, 'They say they want coffee but they don't want coffee. Not when there's *milkshakes*.'

He still orders them coffee— because he does not want teenage girl coffee tantrums on his hands— but also milkshakes— and then he orders *Steve* a milkshake too because the kid says something about him liking *strawberry* and—

Well. It's a *lot* to carry back into the hospital and hand out, but the way *Steve*— who has returned from seeing Heather— perks up at the strawberry milkshake makes it worth it. Also, you know, getting to watch him *suck on the straw*—

The next few hours are *agonisingly boring*. Max wants to stay— even though her mom isn't really doing anything but lying there and getting better. They talk to her doctors. They visit her. He eventually goes with *Steve* to visit Heather— who looks small and faded, but a little more *living human* coloured— they eat shitty food in the shitty cafeteria and drink shitty hospital coffee until he goes out and gets more just to get out of there for a bit— Yeah. Boring.

Boring and every time he sees Susan or Max's face he feels—

Fucking cops. They better catch his old man soon or else he is going to go out and do it for them—

Not that he exactly knows how to turn into a monster on command, but for *Max*— He could work it out.

55. Chapter 55

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For themes of domestic violence and child abuse, I think that's all, but let me know if I missed any.

This is honestly the first opportunity I've had to reply to comments or post this since I posted the last chapter. I'm sorry that the posting schedule got kind of messed up. Sigh. I'm posting this chapter now, and I'm going to get the next one ready and try to post it tomorrow or the next day, but there's a chance I'll have to do so without replying to whatever comments this chapter might get, which I'm not happy about, but I think you'd all probably rather get to the next chapter as soon as possible instead of waiting for me to have the time to reply to things first. Busy, busy. It's really quite tiring.

Thank you all so much for reading, and for the comments and kudos, I hope you enjoy this part—though the one I'm most interested to read your reactions to is the next one...

Late afternoon and he's got Max dozing against one shoulder, Steve dozing against the other, Mrs Byers and El are off to the cafeteria for coffee or food or something to break the monotony, and Sinclair is avidly reading an interior decorating magazine— and he is bored out of his skull.

If he'd thought about what he would feel if something like this ever happened, he would definitely not guess it would be as boring as it is. He hopes Susan wakes up soon— then feels guilty because he's hoping she does so there won't be endless days like this one in the near future, instead of hoping she does because she doesn't deserve to be in a coma because of his dad.

At first he doesn't realise what's going on. He hears the nurse saying

something like, ‘Just through here, sir. Just up a bit further—’

And the next thing there’s a sweaty, freckly mass of faded strawberry blond hair and ruffled moustache crying out, ‘Maxiemoo!’ and she’s starting awake in time for her dad to come swooping in and scooping her up in a cloud of old Turkish cigarette stink.

‘Oh, my girl,’ he’s saying. ‘Look at your face, look at your *face*. I’ll kill that man, I’ll kill— where’s your mom? Do you think they’ll let me see her? I got away as fast as I could— it means I’ll have to go back next week to get everything finalized for the move— but I got away as fast as I could— Oh Maxiemo. What the hell has that bastard done to your face? I’ll kill him. Swear to God, I’ll kill him.’

And then she squeaks an unhappy noise and her arms tighten as hard as they can around her dad and something *cold* wakes up in the very heart of him.

—

After going to see Susan Max’s dad returns white as a sheet and then has to go outside to have a smoke by himself for a bit, promising Max he’ll be right back. She stays pressed to *his* side the entire time her dad is gone, though the moment the man returns she flutters over to him and then gets pulled straight into a hug.

They sit together while Max talks for a while, then Mrs Byers and El show up again and Max’s dad remembers he has to introduce himself — to *them*, but also to Steve and Sinclair— and then everyone’s talking and he sits there, next to Steve, and feels— *weird*.

He remembers always thinking Max’s dad, *Ned Mayfield* he remembers, was *odd*— chattery and quick moving and *affectionate* with his daughter like no other dad he’s ever met. It used to—

Well. He was probably jealous, but who the fuck really knows. The important thing is he’s always been a dick to the man even *before* the guy tried to talk to him about his dad beating him. It makes him feel — *awkward*. Now.

Anyway, soon enough he learns a whole handful of unexpected facts

that are apparently as unexpected for *Max* as they are for him. Such as Ned is apparently *The Hawkins Post's* new editor, such as the man was going to be moving to town anyway, such as the man wants Max to help him go looking for an apartment or house or something— one she likes, because he wants her staying with him until her mom is back on her feet (and apparently Ned thinks Susan should be staying with him too, when she gets out of the hospital, until she's strong enough to be on her own) and after that as often as she wants— such as Ned has got a room at the Motel 6 and wants Max to stay with him there until he does have a proper place.

He's not sure what he thinks about it all. But it's not like he can start a stink about Ned taking Max away from him, taking her away so he can't keep her *safe*— the man is her dad. And, also, he did punch the man in the face, so it's not like Ned is gonna be all that happy to have him hanging around either.

All the time, all the time, the man's pale eyes never once land on him. He feels *invisible*—

It makes these flashes of pain, fire, dart across his face, across everywhere else he's got his scars— and he thinks, maybe, if it wasn't for the death grip Steve has allowed him to get on the brunet's hand he might absolutely lose his shit.

By the time the sun's gone down he feels *exhausted* and like he'd kill someone for a smoke. Ned insists he's going to take Max out for dinner and then the two of them will head back to the motel, Mrs Byers starts making noise about getting home to little Byers and bigger Byers, and Sinclair— reluctant though the kid seems to be to leave Max— starts talking about his parents expecting him home for dinner.

He imagines going back to the Byers', *talking to any of them*—

Fuck. He feels—

—

The minute they step out of the hospital he lights up, offering one to Steve— which the guy waves away— then falls into step with the

brunet at the back of the pack. Mrs Byers, El, Max, Sinclair, Ned, him, Steve— he feels ruffled. Sick of people— maybe not *Steve*—but sick of people.

On this trip out to Mrs Byers' car to get Max's stuff before they all go their separate ways— to meet up again tomorrow, first thing— Steve suddenly stops, grabs his arm, pulls him a little away from the crowd. There is a pause. He looks at the brunet, the brunet looks at anything but him, before the guy eventually meets his eyes and says, looking weirdly *nervous*, 'I know Mrs Byers said you can stay there, but would you prefer to stay at my place, since Max will be with her dad? You look like you need some— some *quiet*, and the Hopper-Byers or Byers-Hopper or *whatever* house— I mean Mrs Byers is great and El is there and everything, but it's not exactly a *peaceful* place.'

The idea of staying with Steve, just the two of them— 'What about your parents?' he manages, even though he's never had the pleasure and Max says they're never home. Still, it's probably better if Steve's dad doesn't walk in on him asking the brunet out— or anything that might happen *after* he asks Steve out. The thought's enough to give him a burst of energy, straighten him out of the slump he's falling into.

Steve shrugs, 'I have no idea where they are or when they'll be back — I mean, dad *said* they were coming back soon, but he's said that before and then they *don't*— so it's not like they'll be there to care.'

He nods as fast as he can without looking like too much of a loser, and then, just in case he's not being clear enough, 'Yeah. Yeah. I would. I would *love* to stay with you—'

Brown eyes examine him for a moment, and then the brunet nods, 'Let's go tell the others, then— Your car's still here? Because mine is. I guess we should drive separately—'

Ok. Whatever Steve thinks— *Him and Steve, alone in the Harrington house—* and unlike last time, this time he's not playing fucking mind games with himself. This time he knows *exactly what he feels—*

56. Chapter 56

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for mentions of domestic/family violence and child abuse, and consent issues in relation to inebriation not because no one wants what's happening. Please let me know if I missed any.

Well... as I said in the chapter notes of the last part I got this ready just after I posted that one, so I have no idea how it was received. I hope you all liked it though. All I'll say is that I hope you find this one... interesting... too, and thank you all for reading, and for the comments and kudos- there are still some chapters to go, because, of course, misunderstandings, but we're getting closer to getting them together now. Much closer.

The first thing Steve does when they get back to the Harrington house is show him to a guest bedroom— This fucking *huge* room that looks like something off a TV set— before asking him if he wants something to eat. He's tired. *Steve's* also obviously tired, but also obviously too— *whatever* it is to just not feed him.

He manages to convince the brunet that he won't keel over with a dinner of nothing fancier than a toasted cheese— which turns out to be the *best* fucking toasted cheese he's ever had, guy's some kind of unrecognised culinary genius after all— and the two of them eat in the kitchen together, alone, sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table, and it's—

Oh yeah. He *likes* this.

You'd think actually getting some fucking food into him would be enough to wake him up a bit, but if anything after he's eaten it feels like he's dozing off in his seat. 'You should go to bed,' Steve tells him, but *no*, he doesn't want to.

Not yet.

And, yeah, mostly it's because he wants to spend time with the brunet— but he also doesn't trust his dreams. It feels like things are catching up to him. It feels like it's going to be a night full of shitty dreams about his shitty dad being a shitty man—

'You got any bourbon?' he asks. He imagines downing a whole bottle in front of Steve— would he be like Adam? Would he fret like someone's mom? Of course he can always tell Steve that it'll barely touch him, tell the guy that because he's a monster—

—

Fuck. He's supposed to have *work* tomorrow— He was supposed to have work *today*, for all he was originally planning on creeping off mid-morning to go see Steve.

He's going to have to ring the pool, try to explain.

—

Fuck.

—

Steve *does* have bourbon— or at least Steve's dad has bourbon, a whole *massive* bottle of bourbon— even though Steve says his dad *hates* bourbon— it was a gift, apparently, from a colleague. They sit in the den and he drinks it straight from the bottle while the brunet sips at glass after glass of red wine, and he says nothing and Steve says nothing, but somehow they're getting closer and closer together until they're all tangled on the couch.

Jesus.

Steve.

He is so *tired*.

He was doing ok, he was doing *ok*— but now it's like every time he closes his eyes he can see Max's fucked up face behind his eyelids and

he *does not want to be seeing Max's fucked up face*. He does not want Max's face to be fucked up in the first place. He does not want Susan lying in the hospital bed. He does not want Max staying with her dad instead of him—

She's so far away from him right now.

So far—

Steve is humming again, and that's nice, and holding Steve is nice. The brunet fits so well into his arms, like he was *made* for it. Made to be held.

He smells so good.

That brown hair feels so soft against his face as he nuzzles into that long neck and that long leg feels so nice as he grabs at it, pulls it over his lap. He wants to get closer. *Closer*. The shallow curve of Steve's waist fits perfectly into his hand. The heat of Steve's body is soaking into him— and it's warm and perfect and even though they're both too hot and too sweaty at the same time he feels too *cold*—

And for a moment he can smell something. Smell something *wrong*. And there's a flash of movement and when he looks up it's like looking into a funhouse mirror, some distorted reflection of himself standing in the room and *staring* at him and Steve with judgement in his gaze— but he blinks and the guy vanishes and then he realises he's drunk all the bourbon and he's tired and worn out enough that he's actually a little drunk.

'Billy?' Steve asks, turning his head towards him and looking at him a little blearily. And it's easy, so easy, to dart in and press his lips to the brunet's. To steal a kiss—

And one kiss becomes another kiss becomes them sealed together at the lips becomes him trying to get his hands under Steve's clothes and rubbing and stroking every inch of flesh he can becomes Steve pulling away becomes Steve *looking* at him becomes—

The brunet slithers ungracefully out of his lap, landing in a heap on the carpet by his feet. Dark eyes meet his. Coral lips— plump. *Kiss*

bitten— and then Steve is licking them, red little tongue darting out— and then the brunet is awkwardly getting to his knees and—

They're both kind of drunk. Maybe he should stop this—

He does not want to stop this.

There's hands on his thighs, pushing his legs apart— and he lets the brunet, shudders when Steve oozes into the space between— and then those hands are on his hips— *hot*. They're burning into him through the denim of his jeans— and then one of them is cupping his dick— He's hard. He's *so* hard. He doesn't think he's ever been so hard in his *life*— and fumbling for his fly and he almost comes then and there—

But he doesn't.

He doesn't even come as Steve's knobbly, boyish hands creep inside, cup his dick, *pull it out*—

A tongue. Kitten lick.

Oh God this is paradise and he's gone insane—

Heat. Warmth. *Suction*—

One hand cupping the base of his dick, stroking what Steve can't take inside his mouth— and Steve is *trying*. Each bob of his head managing more and more, moving down, *down*— and the other hand is clenched desperately into the denim still covering his right thigh—

And the *noises*. Moans, choked off, *desperate*—

Like Steve can't get enough—

Like—

He realises he's going to come and then does before he can manage *anything*, any kind of warning, his hips thrusting up, trying to bury his dick *deep*— and Steve takes it, *takes it*—

And—

And—

In a second. A second. Just let him catch his breath— he's gonna— touch— *nipples*— get his hand on Steve's—

And the exhaustion wells up, black and swallowing, and he falls, falls
—

Falls.

57. Chapter 57

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for mentions of domestic violence and child abuse, fear of violent homophobic reprisal, Steve's self esteem issues, and probably at least one thing I've missed, do let me know if that's the case.

Here we are, back with Steve for yet more angst and misunderstandings. Thank you all so much for sticking with he fic so far, and for the comments and kudos! I hope you enjoy! (I may not be able to post over the weekend, depending what happens, so I just thought I'd apologize in advance if that's what eventuates.)

If he so much as *breathes wrong* he is going to come. Oh God. He can't — He *can't*—

His whole body is tingling with it, heart racing, breaths coming short and sharp, and he's weak with it, collapsed pretty much into Billy's lap, fingers clawing into the blond's jeans, and he *does not know what to do*.

Should he?

Should he?

Is it bad—

He feels dizzy and kind of sick and a bit too drunk to think clearly and most of all *bad* but it's all— it's all bad anyway— and—

And—

If he gets himself off maybe he can think again. He needs to be able to think again. Oh God he is so confused.

Confused.

Confused and Billy's asleep so it's not like the blond can make it all make sense for him because right now he feels ten times as stupid as his dad has ever said he was.

And—

Just a little shift, just a movement, just a redistribution of weight so he can get a hand down there where his dick is hard and throbbing and dripping into his briefs and the seam of his jeans— *the seam*—

And.

Hunched forward, panting, mouthing at the denim beneath his face.

Noises. He sounds like an *animal*.

He—

—

He rests, shuddering on his knees between Billy's legs, trying to catch his breath, feeling the racing of his heart start to slow.

How the hell did he get here?

Of course he remembers it all. Remembers *all of it*— Billy needing him, the hospital, the way the guy seems to have spent almost every moment since then in physical contact with him, Billy's distress, Billy's misery at Max's dad's arrival, suggesting Billy come home with him, eating, drinking, then— He doesn't know who started it. Getting closer. *Closer* on the sofa— and Billy kissing him. Billy *touching* him— And he is so confused. He is so confused.

Because.

Because, because, because— Billy is *straight*. Those posters— even if he hadn't found the guy's collection of *Penthouses*— they're enough to tell him Billy is straight. Billy likes *girls*, likes—

And he is not those things. He is *not* a girl. His body is *nothing* like a girl's body—

But Billy was kissing him. Billy was touching him—

Billy was probably *confused*. Confused and distraught and—

And—

He sucked Billy off.

Oh God.

And that was *good*. He liked that. He'd probably like to do a lot of that in the future— maybe not *just* that, you know, he'd have to get off his knees to cook sometimes and see the kids and— but otherwise.

Otherwise—

But.

Billy is straight and confused and distressed and drunk and *did he take advantage of the blond?*

He doesn't know. He can't tell. He can't *ask*, because Billy is also asleep.

And—

Is Billy going to hurt him when he wakes up?

—

He doesn't know that either. Any more than he knows if Billy wanted this. If Billy will want this *again*—

And, oh, he'd like that. He *wants* that. He wants Billy to want *him*. He
—

But. *But*. Even if Billy *does* want him, like that— which he can't believe, even if Billy *acts* like it. Sometimes— ok. *A lot*— but—

It'll be like with Tommy and Carol, won't it? Because there's no way someone as— *Billy*— as Billy is will want to be in an actual *relationship* with him. Billy is straight and *cool* and could have, like, *any* girl he wants and—

Maybe Billy just wanted his dick sucked and forgot he has *standards* for a moment— which is better than *maybe he took advantage of Billy* — but not by as much as he wishes it was— Because feeling guilty for *hurting* Billy makes him feel bad, but feeling *used* by Billy also makes him feel bad.

And because he doesn't know *which* bad to feel he seems to be mainly feeling *both* of them, *at once*. So, pretty much entirely *shitty*.

And—

And—

If Billy beats him up when the blond wakes up that'll be— Well. That will be *something*. Something he has to deal with— *if he survives*— Then, he thinks, maybe he'll know that Billy didn't want this— or, at least, didn't want it for any longer than the minutes it was happening. But. *But*— if Billy doesn't—

The blond could act like it never happened, that's an option. Not one *he* likes that much, but an option— If Billy does then— *then*— Well. He can *live* with that. He won't be *happy*, but he can survive it—

Maybe he won't be able to let himself as close to Billy as he's been getting, but—

But what if Billy wants it again?

What if Billy really does want what he had with Tommy and Carol? What if Billy wants to— to— and it would be *use him to get off*, wouldn't it? Because that's what they did. They *used* him, and Billy would use him when the blond didn't have a better offer and he—

He—

Yeah. It's funny, because he does want Billy. He wants Billy more than he ever thought he could want anyone, more than *Nancy*— and it's taken *this* to really realise it, but if Billy just wants *that* from him, wants to— to—

Yeah. He doesn't think he can do it. *Survive* it—

Not after everything. Not after Tommy and Carol, and Nancy, and Tommy and Carol *again*—

He'd rather be Billy's *friend* than feel like Billy thought of him as something with as much value as a piece of toilet paper. Something to fulfil a brief biological need and then dispose of.

And it's not like— well. He knows by now there's little chance of him ever having a proper relationship— people just *don't like him enough* once they get to know him— so he should accept any scraps he can get, but he just *can't*.

If he can't have *all of Billy* he doesn't want the *dregs*—

But he's getting ahead of himself. Trying to work out what he'll do, what he'll feel, when he doesn't even *know* what he'll be faced with when the blond wakes up.

God. His face is on Billy's thigh. His mouth tastes like Billy's—

And he can *smell* him, because.

Because.

He forces himself back, away, so he's sitting upright between the blond's legs, and then, just for a moment, he lets himself *look*— and there's Billy's dick, softening now, pretty and pink and flopped out of the guy's fly because he—

He—

And maybe he'll never have this again, and he definitely can't leave the blond like this and Billy's slumped backwards on the sofa and already snoring lightly and—

He reaches out, carefully, *gently*, and it's not to *touch*, not to feel up the unconscious blond, just to tuck that perfect dick back into Billy's jeans, to do them back up— and now it looks like nothing ever happened.

But it did.

It did—

He gets to his feet, almost tripping over himself and into Billy's lap as he does, legs gone to sleep and suddenly all pins and needles. For a moment he pauses, looking down at the blond— *God, he's gorgeous—* but then he makes himself reach out, pull at the guy gently until Billy is lying more comfortably on the sofa, trying not to linger, trying not to *touch* too much—

And it's done. Billy is there. Asleep, no longer slumped in a way that promises an *everything* ache in the morning. And now he has to go, leave the blond. Go upstairs to his own bed and try to sleep and wait for the sword of Dem—? Dam—? Damamo—? D—*something*. *Why can he never remember the kids' nerdy bullshit?* Well, *whoever*-cles to fall in the morning.

He lingers by the light switch, glancing back at Billy— and then makes himself turn away, turning off the rest of the downstairs lights as he goes. His jeans are damp at the front, chafing him— he stops off at the laundry and strips them off, and his briefs, putting them on for a quick wash before climbing the stairs— It feels like there's a million of them, each of them three feet high— He's *tired*.

He knows he got some sleep the night before, remembers dozing off, Billy a warm, *solid* presence in his arms— remembers waking with his head on the blond's shoulder—

Remembers a whole lot of things that seem to add up to Billy being into him, *wanting* him— but he's stupid, he knows that, and he must be doing his math wrong. Or his math is right but he's doing the wrong equation. Or *something*—

God. If it wasn't so late he'd ring Robin. He needs some *advice*— but she'll be angry with him or something, won't she? Sucking *Billy Hargrove's* dick— He better not tell her. He *needs* her, especially when he might be losing Billy—

Billy—

And the *worst* thing is, if he lets himself think about it too long— so he *doesn't*— is that part of him is pissed as all hell with the blond.

Three weeks— well, *almost* three weeks, and not a word, then acting like— like *all that*— and then— and *then*— and—

But he can't be angry at Billy, not for being physically needy— not when Billy's dad almost killed Max's mom, *hit Max*, probably hit Billy — even though what Billy is means there's no evidence left.

Neil Hargrove is a wicked, *evil* man and when he's caught he's going to— He has no idea. Try and borrow some money from someone, his *mom* probably, then hire one of the family's lawyers— again, his *mom's* probably— and get Billy and Susan and Max some legal advice so neither Neil nor the state can screw them over. So they know what to say and do to make sure that man gets the longest sentence the court can serve up. So they don't get screwed out of their rightful portion of the man's assets— so—

He remembers throwing himself between Billy and Officer Callahan, he remembers bellowing about lawyers and making threats and— *How could they think Billy would do that to Max, to her mom?—*

And maybe he is insane, because he does remember Billy beating the shit out of him— But that was then and this is now and Billy actually has *changed*. Billy is becoming a good guy. A good brother. A—

Just—

He really likes Billy.

Wow. Imagine a universe in which Billy wanted to be his *boyfriend*—

Wow.

He just— He'd like that, *so much*.

And he wouldn't let Billy down, or he'd do his best not to. Do his best not to let Billy get sick of him the way Nancy did— and he could suck Billy's dick again, which would be— Yeah. He really does *like that*. And Billy would kiss him, touch him, and they could sleep in the same bed, eat meals together, hang out with the kids together and Billy could get annoyed at them and he could laugh at everyone and

Want.

He wants that.

He wants that more than he's wanted *anything* in a long time— you know, other than to *not die* and for everyone he cares about to *not die* — oh, and for Robin to remain his friend.

—

He showers quickly, trying to ignore the way it feels like someone is *looking* at him. He's probably just self-conscious— Anyway. Billy is here now so he doesn't have to hallucinate that other Billy everywhere all the time—

Still. It feels like someone is *looking* at him, eyes roving his body, and it's *invasive* enough that he wraps himself in the bathrobe he rarely wears in summer and pulls his briefs on under it like he's a shy girl in the changing rooms.

He shouldn't be able to sleep. All this should be keeping him awake, but from the moment he lies down in his bed exhaustion— and the bottle of red wine, earlier— pounce. He drifts, drifts—

There's a weight, on the bed beside him. The sheet he's snuggled under lifts and he shivers, the air cold. So *cold*, stinking of *rot*— and then there's a hand, rough, calloused and dry and touching his belly where his t-shirt has ridden up— and—

He *drifts*.

58. Chapter 58

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for themes of domestic/family violence, child abuse, homophobia and fear of homophobic reprisals- please let me know if I missed any.

Back with Billy again, and also the true main character of this series: angst. Thank you all for reading, sorry I didn't reply to the comments on the last part until now, and that the posting schedule has gotten a bit erratic- depression is not fun and every now and then makes me a useless, avoidant human. Anyway, hope you find this part interesting, and thanks for the comments and kudos for the last part, as well as whatever this one gets! Stay safe out there in this strange world of ours.

It tastes like a cat snuck in and took a shit in his mouth in the night. Jesus Christ. Cracking open an eye he finds himself—

Not in the forest. Not at home. Not at the Byers— *In Steve's den—*

Steve sucked him off.

—

Jesus fucking Christ holy hell.

He didn't, like, *dream* that or something?

He lurches upright, hand going down to his dick— and his fly is done, but his dick isn't quite sitting right in his jeans, more like it's been stuffed back into them by someone other than him, someone who doesn't know how to shift things about to get him *comfortable—*

Also, there's dried jizz in his pubes.

—
Halle-fucking-lujah!

Steve sucked him off.

He feels like getting up and doing a few victory laps of the room— except— *Where is Steve?*

‘Steve?!’ he calls out, then feeling real fucking pleased with himself, ‘Stevie? Babe? Where are you?’

No answer.

Why is there no answer?

No answer implies no Steve and no Steve implies no morning blowjob — also no kissing. He is going to kiss the *hell* out of the brunet next time he sees him—

Which seems like it’s going to be later, since Steve is not in the house — upstairs or downstairs— and when he goes to check outside he passes through the kitchen and finds a note left for him next to a key.

Steve’s gone to Robin’s— which would make him worry and shit, but Steve’s also cooked him some pancakes and left them in the oven for him— which seems like a sweet kind of *boyfriend* thing to do. It’s kind of a pity— they could have had breakfast in bed. There’s the maple syrup, just sitting innocently on the bench when he could have poured it all over Steve’s body and—

Could he actually suck Steve’s dick?

The thought skitters through him, followed shortly by the fact he’s not sure. He is pretty sure he could touch it, he *wants* to touch it— but *put his mouth on it?*

—
Oh shit. He just came in Steve’s mouth and then passed out, didn’t he?

No reciprocation or anything. Not even a bit of kissing while the brunet saw to himself—

Wow.

He has never, *ever* done that to a girl— not even the first time, when he basically came in three seconds, before she even got her hand all the way into his jeans— Guys who do that are—

They are *shitty* guys. He has always, *always* prided himself on making sure the girl he was with got hers too— even back when he hadn't really known what he was doing, he'd at least *tried*—

He sinks down into one of the kitchen chairs—

*What if this is why Steve's not here? What if the brunet is disappointed and is now **avoiding** him?*

Jesus Christ, *what if he's already fucked it all up?*—

Ok. Ok— No point panicking. Steve made him pancakes. Steve would not make him pancakes if the brunet was pissed about the lack of reciprocate— *who the fuck is he kidding? Of course Steve would. Steve's sweet.*

He grabs the note, reading it again, desperately searching for clues— the handwriting's like Steve's always is from every note or shopping list he's glimpsed since they've been whatever they've been— kind of torturously cramped and careful— and the contents. Steve's made him pancakes. Steve is at Robin's. Steve will give him a key to the front door when they meet up later at the hospital, after the brunet has had one cut, but for now here's one to the back door—

There're no little x mark kisses, and it's not signed *love Steve* or anything— but otherwise it seems like a perfectly normal note. *Normal*—

He's probably reading too much into it all. Steve just probably had a prior engagement with Robin and didn't want to wake him after— *everything.*

—

He can feel it there, at the back of his mind, all those *feelings* about what's happened. What his dad has done— but he doesn't want to feel them. Not right now. Not when he could be feeling all the feelings he has about *Steve*.

—

He makes himself some coffee and takes the pancakes out the back to eat by the pool, lighting up when he's done and leaning back to smoke and stare up into the blue summer sky. He needs to ring the pool. He *needs to go to work*— especially since his future's suddenly become a hell of a lot less certain.

It'd be easy to stay here, move in with Steve, let the brunet take care of him— He wouldn't be much of a man if he did that, would he? Also he doesn't know if that's what *Steve* wants—

He can't go back to his dad's house— not even if it somehow becomes *his* house in the fallout— which it *won't*. He thinks most of the money was Susan's and the rest was borrowed from the bank, but he's not exactly sure. His dad has never liked him knowing much about the man's financial situation.

Max is with her dad now, or else he'd have to worry about housing her too, but he—

He does *want* to stay with Steve. He wants it a *lot*—

But if he's going to basically move in with the guy he should try to pay his own way. Pay some of the bills and for some of the food and shit—

Which is *doable*. He could do that— and he likes the idea way better than getting some shitty little apartment by himself and then spending every night with Steve anyway.

Yeah. *Yeah*—

He *could* do that— If it's ok with Steve.

They wouldn't even have to worry about the guy's parents if what Max has said is true—

So. He'll ring the pool, try to work something out— maybe go in later in the day— because he *needs* to see Max at some point today— if only so he can convince himself she's still ok— and he'd prefer that point to be as soon as possible— and they were talking about waking Susan up, weren't they? So he needs to be there for that—

A noise. Wood on wood— He glances over to the side gate and sees a man step into the Harrington backyard while holding a toolbox. *What* —?

The man sees *him*, freezes, and then six-foot *something* of corn-fed, all American, meathead is stomping over and demanding to know who he is.

He glares up at the guy, remembering what Robin said about *Richie Lewis* being at the Harrington house— and what Tommy insinuated. Or, he *thinks* Tommy insinuated, because it wasn't like that was a clear and coherent insinuation— This looks like a Richie Lewis—

A Richie Lewis who looks pissed as hell for no good reason he can see.

'I'm Steve's friend,' he says.

'Then how come I've never seen you around before?' the man demands. 'I've met all of Steve's *guy* friends—' Is he imagining it or is there something there, some kind of meaning he's not getting. Whatever the hell it's *pissing him off*.

'What? You think I just broke into the Harrington house and made Steve make me pancakes before lounging out here for a smoke?' he snaps, watching the way the man's eyes immediately search out the plate before flicking back up to his face. Anyway, he *thinks* this is Richie Lewis, but how the hell does he know for sure? This could be some government bullshit or some creep who's broken in to perve on the brunet— 'Who are *you*, anyway? You think you've got the right to come over here and start shit like you belong here, when Steve's never even *mentioned* whoever you are.'

Something crosses the guy's face at that, but soon the man's expression is smoothing over. 'I'm Richie Lewis. Mr Harrington has

hired me to do some work around here before he and Mrs Harrington get back.'

'Yeah, well I'm *Steve's friend*, as I said—' Jesus. This guy— *looming over him*— trying to *intimidate* him— *him*— He wants to punch this guy in his fucking *face* and then maybe his balls— But if Richie Lewis is doing some work for Steve's dad— Probably best he *doesn't*. He *could*. Shit. He could *so easily*— Guy wouldn't even know what hit him— Ah. Fuck. '— and I've got to head out.' He gets up, smirking a little at the way the man has to stumble backwards— fucking guy getting *too fucking close*.

He heads back into the house— trying to ignore the way the man bellows something about checking his story with Steve when he next sees the brunet. 'You do that *Dickie*, you do that—' he calls out over his shoulder before shutting the sliding door and locking it. Locking the man *out*—

Fucking *weird*. The whole thing gave him a weird vibe.

He heads upstairs to take a shower in Steve's bathroom— and, yeah, *jerk off* again in the brunet's shower, but could anyone blame him? Smells like Steve— because he didn't bring any of his shower products into the actual shower even though they're waiting for him in the guest room. He wants to *stink* of Steve. Signal to anyone who might even *look* at the brunet that the guy's taken— shower's fucking *big* too— the two of them could fit easily— and doesn't that just sound *fun*— and get dressed in clean clothes before heading over to the hospital.

The last thing he does in the Harrington house is pick up that key— and it feels *cold* in his hand— weird, and he can smell—

Nothing. Imagining shit.

Max runs up to him when she spots him and before he's even thought about it he's pulling her into his arms. 'You doing ok, shithead? Your dad treating you good?'

She nods, wincing a little and raising a hand to her spectacularly bruised face at the movement, and then says, 'He is so worried about

mom—’ and then, ‘— I thought he stopped caring about her.’

He glances over at the man—standing just far enough away that he won’t be able to hear anything— and finds those pale eyes looking at him, *assessing* him. ‘Feelings are complicated,’ is all he can think to tell her, but it doesn’t look like she was really looking for an explanation, just wanted to tell someone, because she nods and then leads him over to her dad.

The man puffs up a little, awkward, before letting out a frustrated sigh and managing a nod of acknowledgment. He nods back. It’s—

Well. If it wasn’t for Max he would be avoiding Ned as much as he could, and, *no*, he does not want to apologize for hitting the guy, and *no*, he does not think the guy would forgive him and suddenly everything would be ok.

It’s not long before Mrs Byers shows up with El, Sinclair and little Byers this time— Kid’s still looking *good*. Managing to keep the hair epic and clothe himself so he doesn’t scream *loser*— as well as the Chief.

Ned wants to talk to the man first, and they disappear for a bit, him and Max going in to see Susan while they’re away. He thinks she looks a bit better. Better colour to her face, and looking less like she’s about to *vanish*. Max tells him they haven’t seen the doctors yet, and that she doesn’t know yet if they’re going to try and wake her mom up— He hopes that if they do it *works*. That Susan is ok.

Then the Chief drags him off to talk— though by *talk* what he really means is tell him that his dad and his dad’s woman have dumped the car, that they seem to be heading South East, and that there have been some sightings, but none confirmed just yet. Somehow he manages not to tell the cop that the entire police force are *absolutely useless*, but it’s close.

Jesus— If they don’t find his dad— It may be too late to hunt the guy down now. Maybe he shouldn’t have listened to Steve—

The thought makes him feel *weird*.

On his way back to Max he stops at a payphone to ring the pool—and, of fucking *course*, his fucking *supervisor* answers— The guy is a dick. The guy has always been a dick— He gets told that if he doesn't come in by lunchtime he's out of a job, and, worse, that his pay will probably be docked— there's more to it than that, of course, the same old Neil-like bullshit about *responsibility* and *being a man*— and he's about a hair's breadth from telling the guy to shove the job up his ass, but—

But—

So he has to play nice. So he has to agree to come in by lunchtime—even though the moment he saw Max all he wanted to do was stay with *her* today— fuck it. *Fuck it—*

When he gets back to her she tells him they've seen the doctor and they're going to try and wake Susan up sometime today— he tells her he has to go to work, then makes sure she knows the pool's number and gets her to *promise* to ring him there if she needs to, if *anything at all* goes wrong, or even if she needs to talk to him. Thankfully she does— Jesus her face looks like shit— and Mrs Byers promises to stay with her— and he *likes* Mrs Byers. The more times he's met her the more he's come to the conclusion that she seems real nice— so hopefully she'll be ok until he gets back.

It's a fucking *wretched* day at the pool. People keep *looking* at him— he should have expected that, but still, somehow he *didn't*— and whispering about him— his dad, really. But it feels the same— He's not sure if it's better or worse that Adam basically comes running the moment he pulls up and then babbles some shit about '*Thank Christ you're ok. You will not believe the shit people in this town are saying happened—*' before trying to interrogate about what did, actually happen—

At least Adam's not stupid and *shuts the fuck up* when he snaps at the guy. Even looks a bit sorry. Even spends most of the day at his side, running interference with the town's many busybodies that want to get in his face about what his dad's done—

*They all think Susan is dead, some of them think **Max** is too—* and some of them look at *him* with suspicion.

By the end of the day he feels like absolute *shit*. He wants to get back to Max— hopes that she didn't call because everything's good— and also. *He wants to see Steve.*

Whatever good feelings the morning gave him— even mixed in with all the worry— have faded. Not even remembering that Steve sucked him off is enough to keep the anger at his dad at bay and the—

Whatever emotion that one is. Is it *grief*? If it's grief then what's he grieving for?

What he wants— as much as he wants anything— is to get away from everyone. To wrap himself in Steve, in the *comfort* of the brunet— to spend time with Max— to just be a little family of him and Max and Steve— and to—

Yeah. *Get away from everyone else—*

But, before he can get back to the hospital, he has to tell Adam he's ok, *again*, and then he has to then repeat it to Brad and Amy— lurking in the car park just to see him— and he doesn't know how that makes him feel.

Good and bad and all complicated.

It's— *Friends*. It's good having friends, even though right this moment he wishes they'd leave him the hell alone—

Maybe it would be better if it was just Adam and Amy— his feelings about Brad are still *complicated*. So far the guy's done nothing horribly homophobic in front of him again, but—

What a fucking thing to have to worry about.

Jesus he feels sorry for all the gay guys— and girls— and bisexuals, or whatever, who can't just beat someone to a pulp if they have to— and it's a fucking shitty world that anyone has to in the first place.

Jesus.

He should probably check in with little Byers, make sure the kid is ok, make sure the kid is still doing his weights and running too—

People better not go around fag bashing in *his* town. He'll rip their fucking heads off.

When he finally escapes the cling of Amy, Adam and Brad— when they're finally willing to accept that *he's* ok. Or if not *ok* then still standing— and gets back to the hospital Max greets him with huge, happy eyes. 'She woke up!' she shrieks, before quietening down at the nasty look the nurse walking by gives her. 'She woke up! She remembers who I am! The doctor said it doesn't look like she has any *cognitive loss*— though they're still doing tests— Oh my God Billy she woke up!'

He pulls her into another hug, and he feels fierce and protective and *happy for her*. Happy for Susan too— and she drags him by the hand to join the others, and he sees Steve— *fuck he's pretty*— and he goes to reach for the brunet, pull him in close— maybe not *kiss* him, not in front of everyone— but get Steve back at his side.

And Steve— Steve *flinches*.

Steve *flinches*—

A smile, a pretty smile, but a smile that is utterly, completely, totally *fake* comes across the brunet's face a moment later, but it doesn't fool him. He saw. Steve *flinched*.

Steve flinched *away from him*. His *touch*—

59. Chapter 59

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for themes of domestic/family violence, and child abuse, mental health issues, as well as a character worrying that they have accidentally forced someone into a sexual encounter- please let me know if I missed any.

Happy holidays for those that celebrate something this time of year! Otherwise happy end of 2020! We are getting closer to Billy and Steve getting things sorted out between them, but there's still a little way to go yet. Thank you all for sticking with the fic, and sorry the posting schedule has gotten so erratic- I'll try to post another part over the weekend, and then go back to mid week and then weekend for the chapters left- and I just went and checked how many words I have left to post and it's appx 16,000- so... Well. It **feels** like we're getting closer to them getting their shit together, but there is a bit of a way to go. Anyway, Thank you all so much, as I said, and for the comments and kudos! I hope you enjoy. Stay safe out there!

He doesn't really remember the next few hours. There are flashes, voices, Max— doing his best to make sure Max can't see something's wrong— Steve— that same tortured smile. Being so *careful* to act like nothing's wrong— Going in to see Susan— and she's asleep, and she looks tired, but she also looks *so much better*— driving in his car. Sitting with everyone at the diner— two tables pushed together— the taste of steak in his mouth. Max sitting next to him. Chirpy. *Happy*— Driving again— pulling up outside the Harrington house— the feel of Steve carefully pressing a different key into his hand, the metal warm from Steve's body— and then Steve's wishing him a good night and saying something about them both being tired and those brown eyes look so *sad* and—

Did he hurt Steve? Did he force Steve? Did he—

He remembers. Drinking, kissing, Steve going to his knees—

Does the brunet regret it or is it something *more*—?

It looks like more. The way Steve is acting is like it's more.

And—

He sleeps. He knows that. Doesn't dream. Wakes. Steve makes crepes, they sit opposite each other in silence, and *that fucking smile* makes him want to rip the whole world apart, and then Steve leaves— goes to see Robin, says they'll meet at the hospital later— and he gets ready, goes to work, and Adam is there, and Adam takes one look at him and won't leave his side, and work is something like *hell*, and then he leaves and goes to the hospital and Max is there and Steve and Steve's fake *smile* and Susan is doing better and better and he sees her and she recognises him and asks if he's *ok*, *did his dad hurt him?* And he tells her no and she's so grateful for that it makes him *sick* that he didn't step in properly the first time he even *suspected* his dad ever hurt her— and then she's tired again and Max has gone in to see her and he's sitting on an uncomfortable chair and his dad is still out there, somewhere, and then the kids are going to the Wheelers to play one of their nerd games— Wheeler Jr *insists*, something about little Byers and Max saying *Mike's being an obsessive weirdo*— and Steve is going too and Karen will be there and—

He goes back to the Harrington house by himself.

He's hungry— hasn't eaten since breakfast— and he's thinking that he can probably toast himself a cheese without burning the place down, but there's another note in the kitchen, Steve's handwriting again— just in case he didn't want to go to the Wheelers' Steve has cooked him dinner. It's waiting in the oven.

Casserole and mashed potatoes and green beans. Fucking *delicious*.

He eats it sitting at the kitchen table, looking at the empty seat where Steve should be, and feels—

—

After dinner he sits out by the pool and smokes half a pack of Gauloises, staring up at the sky, at the stars, the moon— *It's all gone wrong*— he tries to watch some TV, can't stick to a channel for more than five seconds—thinks maybe he should get up, get dressed up, go find one of Hawkins eternal parties, find a girl, *fuck* away all this misery he feels into her—

The doorbell rings.

What?

It rings again— then someone's pounding on the door, rough and impatient—

He's rough when he opens the door, sending it slamming back against the door stop. 'What?!' snarled out before he even processes that he's looking at Tommy fucking H.

The dark-haired guy *stares* at him.

He glares back, until he can't take it anymore. 'The fuck do you want, limp dick?'

'Why are you *here*?' the guy *wails*.

'Because Steve wants me to be,' he answers, even though he's not entirely sure it's *true*.

The other guy freezes, seems to get even paler, freckles and red eyes and the shadows underneath them all standing out in sharp relief. For a long moment no one says anything, but then Tommy nods, once, jerkily, and turns to go.

He should leave it. He *should*, but— 'You didn't answer freckleface. What the *fuck* do you want?' it comes out a snarl.

Tommy pauses, glances back at him, eyes roving from his presence filling the doorway to the house behind him, then says, voice brittle, 'Heather woke up. Could you tell Steve?'

And he nods and he watches Tommy leave and—

Suspicion, but he's not sure of what. He knows he's missing something, missing something that should be fucking *obvious*, but—

He goes back out by the pool and smokes the other half of the pack of Gauloises— he needs to get more— before eventually peeling himself off the lounge and creeping up to go to bed.

This time he dreams and wakes and remembers— He lies there, in the obscenely comfortable guest bed, and wonders why his brain decided to torment him with images of the Upside Down inside *this* house— with following *himself* but not himself, about six feet behind, as the other him— looking like a skinny, grimy junkie wearing a black sweater that looks far too posh for him— crept through the halls, crept downstairs, watched Steve let himself in as quickly as he could. Watched Steve stand there, just inside the front door, and hang his head— the picture of misery— watched Steve wipe at his face like he'd been crying— watched Steve creep through the dark house until he was upstairs, in his bathroom, getting ready for bed— watched Steve until the guy actually was in bed, watched Steve— The last thing he remembers from his dream was watching the other him sit on the side of Steve's bed and watch Steve sleep, reaching out a hand — grimy, *gross* looking hand— and stroking it down Steve's side with an *intense* look on that gaunt, ragged looking face.

What the ever loving fuck?

It's guilt. Has to be—

Though he still doesn't know what he's supposed to be feeling guilty *for*. If only Steve would talk to him— but then, it's not like he's opened his mouth and asked what the fuck the guy is thinking. He—

*What if Steve tells him that he hurt or forced or did something **terrible** to the brunet that night, and the guy's now terrified of him again, and only letting him stay because Steve's such a fucking **good** guy and—*

He needs to buy some more cigarettes.

Over breakfast— homemade fucking *waffles* this time. With proper whipped cream and carefully cut up little strawberries— he manages to tell Steve that Tommy H showed up and wanted him to know

Heather woke up.

The brunet stares at him, eyes big, dark, *hurt* looking— ‘Is that all he said?’

What?

Again, the sense he’s missing something. Something *obvious*—

He shrugs. ‘Yeah. He wasn’t even really a dick or anything, surprising now I think about it.’

For a moment there it looks like Steve is about to say *something*— but then the brunet doesn’t and that fake smile eats up the hurt look in those brown eyes and he *hates* it.

They go their separate ways, him to work— since he’s only on in the morning today he doesn’t feel like he has to go see Max first thing when he can see her after lunch— Steve off to wherever it is Steve goes when the brunet is avoiding him. Because Steve *is*, he’s sure of it. Steve is *avoiding him*.

That Richie Lewis rolls up in his truck just as he’s getting in his baby to head to the pool— he sees the guy staring at him, then staring back at the house, *something* on that meathead face.

Adam isn’t working today, which is fucking *terrible*. The whispers and the questions and the girls and *women* who come up to him, tits out, all fake *sympathy* start to make him feel even crazier than he already feels. He takes his turn up in the chair with relief, doing everything he can to project an air of professional *fuck off and let me do my job* that doesn’t entirely work, but works a bit better than if he’s on the ground, on foot, somewhere they can *corner* him.

He leaves as soon as he can, pulling away from the pool and speeding off to the 7-11 for more Gauloises— which they don’t have. Fuck. All out of stock and not sure when more are coming— and apparently they only get them in for *Mrs Harrington* and she’s not in town much.

So—

He sighs, asks for a couple of cartons of his old Marlboros, looking at

the red packaging and feeling— Yeah. It'd be better, he thinks disappointing but not so fucking *futile* feeling, if he got to see Candy — but it's some other faceless Hawkins drone again.

The plan is to go to the diner for real coffee for everyone before he goes to the hospital— not that he's exactly sure who *everyone* will be — but he can ring the hospital from the phone box near there and ask first. Also— honestly— he is *hungry*— and all he can think about eating is red meat, rare and bloody. A weird kind of comfort food— and he doesn't want to admit it but he kind of needs comfort right now.

He feels incredibly *alone* for someone who suddenly has friends and a sister that he no longer feels needs to be defined by the “step” in front of the word.

60. Chapter 60

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For homophobia, homophobic assault, misogyny, street harassment, basically- a female character getting cornered by a group of guys in public, grabbed, facing slurs, and being threatened with unwanted sexual attention, some mentions of domestic/family violence, please let me know if I missed any.

So, basically, I was depressed, and there was a bit of chaos in my personal life, and there was some stuff in this chapter I didn't feel up to dealing with even just to post it, so I put it off, meaning to do it "tomorrow" but then the tomorrows piled up and here we are. So sorry everyone. I hope you do find this chapter kind of interesting, but it may be a bit upsetting, considering- Thank you all so much for reading, reviewing, and leaving kudos! I appreciate it so much.

He parks his car half a block down from the diner, pulling out a cigarette from his last half a pack of Gauloises as he walks, taking in the smoke and wondering how long it'll be before he smells it again when the pack's done. They make him think of Steve. Steve who is so close and so far away at the same time.

Steve he may never get to touch ever again—

'*Get back here you fucking dyke!*' he almost drops the cigarette, then does flick it violently into the gutter when a voice returns with.

'Let go of me! What the hell do you think you're doing Daniel Caulfield?!'

That's *Robin*.

He breaks into a run, heading straight for the shouting. Hearing

Tommy H. say something like, 'Come on man, get off her,' and another guy laughing and saying something about, 'You started it, so don't pussy out now,' and then the first voice taunts, 'Come on Birdie, gimme a kiss. Prove you're not a dyke,' and Robin is shouting '*Get off me! Get off me! Don't touch me!*' and he rounds the corner just as Mr Duvall from the garage is bursting out of the diner and bellowing, 'You let go of that girl at once young man!' and a voice— *Candy's* voice, and then Adam's, the *Brad's*— are coming from across the road, a mix of words that all mean *get away from her*— and he sees her, sees she's red in the face and trying not to cry, and some potato faced jock he kind of recognises is grabbing at her even as she slaps at him as roughly as she can, and there's another potato faced jock just there, and then *Tommy H.*, looking pale and worried, and—

He grabs the guy who has Robin and *drags* him off her, slamming the jock into the brick wall of the shopfront, hand closing over the guy's throat. His face burns, all of him burns, lines of fire— *coming apart*—

'You ok Robin?' he grits out, risking a glance from the asshole he's holding to her, just in time to see Candy crash onto the scene, fluttering around Robin for a moment, obvious strangers, before pulling the other girl into her arms when Robin doesn't object. Behind them he sees Tommy H turn and run, a moment later the other jock following—

Hunt them—

Roughly he drags the guy in his grasp away from the wall and flings him at Brad with no more than a, 'Contain him,' as he goes after the two fleeing.

Tommy H. is further away, faster, probably *smarter*— as much as he hates to admit it— smart enough to take a sudden turn and flee away from both him and the other jock, and then he has to decide— and he *hates* freckleface— but he can remember the guy's voice saying to let Robin go, so it's the other one he goes after—

And it's so hard not to let himself come apart.

It'd be so easy to *slip*, become a monster, work out all the pain and frustration of the last few days in *blood*—

But. Fear. Government. Labs. Freedom. *Steve—*

He grabs the guy, ignoring the way the jock flails and kicks and hits at him, shouting obscenities and threats, as he drags the guy back up the street to the cluster of Robin and Candy and Adam and Brad and Mr Duvall and the other meathead still in Brad's grip.

He gets back in time for to hear Mr Duvall insist they call the cops, and that *Jim Hopper won't stand for this kind of behaviour in his town—* but Robin— trying not to cry but not succeeding. Astonishingly red in the face, body language reeking of distress— starts insisting that she doesn't want the cops called. That she doesn't want anyone to know — and there's Candy trying to comfort her and behind Candy, Adam —

Black hair, grey eyes, similar but not the same— Oh. Cousin.

Fuck, he's so stupid sometimes.

'Dickbag Tommy H. got away,' he says as the collective of eyes turn his way. 'This *dickhole* didn't, though,' he shakes the guy in his grip.

He sees the way Robin flinches and feels his grip tighten on the guy, ignoring his cry of pain.

'I know you don't want a fuss, Miss Buckley,' Mr Duvall is saying to her, 'But that kind of behaviour can't go unchecked. Boys like that grow into *bad* men.'

Robin is nodding, nodding, still trying not to cry, 'I know Mr Duvall. I know. But I— my *mom*, my *dad*— I can't bear it if they—'

And now they're all attracting an audience, people drifting out from inside the diner, from around town. Jesus. 'Surely you can't mean that,' Mr Duvall is saying. 'Your parents would be very worried about you if they—'

'I know!' she yelps, interrupting the old man, then flinching. 'I'm so sorry Mr Duvall, I didn't mean to shout. I just— I don't want my parents *worrying* about me.'

He hears Candy saying something softly about, 'Is there anything we

can do?’

He doesn’t know what to do.

He’s still got the one jock, Brad the other— and they’re in the middle of town in the middle of the day— and he can remember the kick of the gun in his hand, the mad Doctor falling, the feel of it again, unloading it into the Russian’s head, the bat, bringing it down— and the way his dad had cried out as he *twisted* the man’s arm— and *he should never have let Neil escape*— and—

‘I want *Steve*,’ he hears Robin say, and she’s suddenly grabbing his spare arm, looking him in the eye— he can see the tears welling up that she doesn’t want to let fall— and she’s saying, ‘Billy can you go get Steve— he’s at the hospital, visiting Heather. We were going to meet at the diner for lunch—’

Ok. ok.

He can do *that*—

‘Adam, catch,’ he says, before flinging the jock he’s holding to the dark-haired guy. Adam catches. *Good*. He looks at them, Adam, Brad, Candy, Mr Duvall— ‘Keep her *safe*,’ he orders, and turns to go.

As he hurries back to his car he hears Adam talking, tone deceptively conversational. ‘I don’t know who I’m more disappointed in. You, Dan C. or *you*, Jake’ then, a sigh, ‘Doesn’t really matter. I’m *disgusted* by both of you— you should be grateful we all graduated or I would have seen you both off the team, as it is— I’m going to let everyone know that *you’re not welcome* anymore. No more parties, no more girls— You’re *nothing* from now on—’

It feels wrong to just *leave*, but Robin wants Steve, and getting Steve is really the only *human* thing he can do for her right now.

When he gets to the hospital he almost *runs into* Steve as the brunet is leaving. He grabs the other guy before he can think about it, feels Steve *freeze*— *Why?Why?Why?Why?Why?Why?Why?Why?*— and then almost lands on his ass jerking backwards and away from the guy.

Jesus fucking Christ, dignity out the window much?

‘Billy—’ the brunet begins, and there’s so much— *stuff* in the guy’s face and voice and all of it that he blurts out something about *Robin* and *needs you* and *attacked* and *Tommy H. and a couple potato faced jocks*, and Steve goes pale and frightened and he has to rush and tell the guy she’s ok, before basically dragging the brunet over to his baby and speeding off back to the heart of town.

When they get there the jocks are gone— as are Adam and Brad— and Robin, Candy and Mr Duvall have all migrated into a booth in the diner. Candy is sitting next to Robin, talking to her quietly, and Mr Duvall is sitting opposite, drinking coffee with a look on his face that makes him look *exactly* the kind of asshole he used to think the guy was.

‘*Robin*,’ Steve breathes out, rushing past him and over to her.

She looks up the moment the brunet speaks, lurching out of the booth to fling herself into his arms. She starts crying then, perfectly soundless, and Steve makes a *wounded* noise before starting that humming sound.

Candy gets up out of the booth, carefully— she’s wearing all black, something edging on the boundaries between a goth and a punk and a librarian— and for a moment she just *looks* at Steve and Robin, confused or disappointed or something, before sighing and looking at him. ‘I’ll tell Adam and Brad she’s ok,’ she says, ‘Or as ok as she’s going to get.’

He nods, then, on impulse, ‘Good to see you Candy Cane. Missed you at the 7-11.’

She shrugs, ‘I’ve been busy—’ she pauses, and then, ‘I’ll admit I was impressed, the way you went for Dan C. Not every guy would intervene when their peers are tormenting a girl— in fact *most* guys I know wouldn’t. Would probably join in instead.’

‘What about your cousin and his potato faced friend?’

‘Adam and Brad?’ she smirks. ‘Between me and his mom— and his *dad*, no point denying credit where it’s due— Adam’s been well trained— I can only assume Brad absorbed it by exposure.’

‘Billy?’ Steve’s voice comes hesitantly, jerking his attention back to the guy. Robin is still in his arms, looking *exhausted*— and the way it’s so easy to tell it’s *friendship*, or maybe something like siblingship, and not *romantic* is nowhere near the comfort he once would have found it. ‘Would it be ok if you drove us back to my place?’

‘Of course,’ he replies almost before the last syllable has left the guy’s mouth. He turns back to the other girl, ‘See you around, Candy Cane,’ accepting her nod in return, and then giving his own nod to Mr Duvall— the man suddenly looking very tired and very *old*— before ushering Steve and Robin out of there and into his car.

They sit crammed together in the back seat while he drives, and he can’t help overhearing Steve as her what happened. *She’d returned those tapes to the Family Video and was window shopping, she didn’t see the boys until Tommy H. called out to her, asking her where her “boyfriend” was— Steve, of course— she told him to fuck off, then the boys started hassling her, getting in her way, not letting her past, Tommy H. going on and on about Steve— mean, cruel things, calling him a pussy and a faggot and trash— and she couldn’t help herself, got in his face, said something—* but she refuses to say what it was, exactly, and he catches her gaze in the rearview mirror as she looks at him and then away— *to Tommy H. that pissed the guy off. He called her a stupid dyke who should learn to keep her mouth shut and it all escalated from there—*

When they get back to the house Steve takes his arm, just for a moment before the brunet suddenly pulls away, looks away, and thanks him, before saying, ‘Say hello to Max for me?’

He has never felt more dismissed in his life.

So he does what Steve wants, goes back to the hospital, spends time with Max, even sees Susan for a bit— and then, remembering, goes to see Heather. She’s asleep, but it seems like a natural sleep— and *relief*, relief almost *crushing* in its intensity rushes through him. He has to sit down, all but falling into the chair nearest her room.

Heather is awake. Susan is awake. They are both *alive*.

61. Chapter 61

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For mentions of child abuse, for mentions of domestic violence, for mentions of terminal illness and child death, for mentions of what happened to Robin last chapter- ie street harassment, for mentions of mental illness, please let me know if I missed any.

Ok, so for the next few chapters I'm not going to bother with the posting schedule, because I hope that by letting myself have a bit of slack then the guilt I feel for missing a day won't help contribute to me deferring posting for even longer. Yeah. Things are what they are, I guess. On another unrelated note- which seems faintly ludicrous considering how unmotivated I am to do basically anything right now- but if I ever wrote any original fic in the future would any of you be interested? Even if it meant that I probably wouldn't end up writing much fanfic from that point onwards. I wouldn't be posting it here, if I did, for a few reasons I won't go into. I do really like writing and do want to try and work on my own stuff sometime. Sorry if this note and the replies to your comments are a bit lacklustre, am in a weird mood again. But at least I am posting, so I'll take that as a win.

Thank you all so very much for reading, for sticking with this story so far, and for leaving kudos and comments to let me know you're enjoying it! I do appreciate it so very much. Stay safe out there all of you. 2021 so far is not looking that different from 2020.

Max invites him to join her and her dad for dinner at the diner— Mrs Byers apparently had to go back to work and the kids are— *elsewhere*, wherever that is. Not spending all their day waiting around at the

hospital like Max— so it's just the three of them. Ned looks like he wants to have dinner with him roughly as much as *he* wants to have dinner with Ned— but Max is looking so *hopeful*. Fine. Whatever. Fuckit.

It's awkward and horrible and he does not enjoy himself, but it means he can spend time with her, and it's over soon enough. Ned obviously not wanting to *linger* if lingering includes him.

When he gets back to the Harrington house he finds Steve and Robin curled up together on the couch— she's been crying again, he can tell — he thinks *Steve* has been too— watching some absolutely *tedious* looking film— Steve asking her to explain what the hell's happening as he enters the room, and probably not for the first time knowing how bad the guy is at following film plots.

He looks at them, they pause the music and look at him, *greet* him, and they're so sweet curled up together and Steve is such a *good guy* and— 'I'm going for a walk,' he says before he's even thought about it.

He's already back outside and halfway down the street before the reality that he *hates* walking sinks in— or at least aimlessly strolling around with no destination. Whatever. He wants to be alone.

His head's a mess of fucking *negativity*— almost as bad as it used to be— and his life's falling apart even though he's pretty much sure no one else can see it.

Maybe he can take that icecream machine back? Since Steve doesn't seem to want him after all—

Hah. He was so fucking *wrong*.

He lights up his last Gauloise, sucks in a lungful of smoke, keeps walking. Walking. He's got no plans, no destination, just—

Walking.

He's finished the Gauloise and been forced to start on a new pack of Marlboros when his head jerks up like it's on a string, attention caught and *dragged* to a house over the road. *Where is he?* He's been

to this street before, been to a party a few houses up when he first got to Hawkins. The houses are large, nice, expensive— but not as expensive as those around where Steve lives.

*Why is his attention being dragged to **that** house in particular?*

He butts out his cigarette, intending to cross over and investigate— but then the fucking *Chief* is pulling up to the curb right next to him and stomping his way out of the car. He looks at the man. The man looks back—

Funny. He realises as the cop approaches that he's no longer— *whatever* he was of the man. Not scared. Not exactly. But— *wary*. Wary for good reason, considering most of his interactions with the police over the years.

Chief Hopper seems to be, all in all— not a terrible guy.

'Do I want to know what you're doing outside Daniel Caulfield's house?' the guy asks, a *knowing* look on his face.

Daniel Caul— Dan C. That was Dan C. that grabbed Robin, he remembers— he must have— *instinct*, it must have been instinct. A predator's instinct. 'She's *his* best friend,' is all he can bring himself to say. He has no idea what he was going to do— no conscious decision even made— but obviously on some level he had decided to go after the guys who attacked Robin.

'I know,' the Chief says with a sigh, then fishes in his pocket and offers him a cigarette before taking one himself, lighting them both with a cheery *orange* Bic this time. 'Tomas Duvall rang me once you'd taken them back to the Harrington place— I know she didn't want anyone to know, doesn't want her parents worrying— he told me that too— but by lunchtime tomorrow there won't be a single person in this town who hasn't heard already. So, as far as we both see it, there's no reason for me not to go around all those boys' houses and have a *stern word* with their folks. That kind of shit is *not acceptable*, not anywhere, but definitely not in *my town*.' The guy sighs, 'I feel like I'm saying that a lot lately. *My town, my town*— I just want things to be *better*, you know? So much shit's happened—' the cops gaze flicks over to him, 'Anyway. Not the point, the point— or, I guess, the

question is, again, what are *you* doing here? Something stupid, I'll bet.'

'I—' he sighs, gaze once more going to the house across the road, the lights on inside, Dan C. or whoever just running around, no *consequences*. 'I don't know. I just— I *don't know*. It's all *fucked*. It's all fucked and I can't do anything to fix it.' Wow. He did not mean to admit that much.

There's a pause, then the Chief says, 'Come on, I know it's late, but let's go get some coffee and— I dunno— maybe we should have a chat about a few things.'

'Like *what?*' he snaps.

'Like the fact we still haven't caught your dad and I'm sure you have all sorts of feelings about that, for one,' is the man's reply, a wince coming across his face at the word *feelings*.

'Fine. Fuck. *Whatever*.' But he still climbs into the man's truck and lets the guy drive them back to the diner. When they get there the Chief tells him to stay in the truck while he runs in and gets the coffee, and when he demands to know *why* instead of them both going in and sitting in the diner, the man asks him if he really wants everything they talk about overheard and spread around town. Ok. He gets it.

He sits there, truck window open, smoking another one of his Marlboros, until the man gets back, taking the proffered coffee and not even complaining when the guy starts up the car and drives them off into the middle of nowhere.

They sit and smoke and sip for a while, and then the Chief says, 'I'm sorry we haven't caught your dad. There have been sightings— and they have been looked into— but there's been nothing *concrete* for at least the last day. We think they might have gone to ground somewhere, but other than the fact we haven't managed to find any good leads about where he might go, it's also looking increasingly like your dad isn't the one running the show.'

'That Mc-*something* woman?' he asks.

The Chief nods. ‘She’s a clever woman, much more clever than her husband ever gave her credit for. Than *any* of us gave her credit for—the embezzling from her husband’s company must have been her idea — she’d been at it for at least a year before your family arrived in town, though the amounts seem to have increased a lot in these last couple of months— around the time we have the first witness accounts of her being seen talking to your dad— We’re working out what we can charge him with there, too. There’s enough evidence to suggest he was involved that he won’t be able to wriggle free, not on *any* of the charges, not if we can help it—’

‘How much?’ he asks. A bit of financial fraud is very much in Neil’s character, but this sounds like more than the little lies and scams the man would always deny pulling. He remembers the few times his dad had ever gone to church with his mom— how there’d always been some issue with the donations box shortly after.

A pause, then the Chief says, ‘Almost a million dollars. So far unrecovered.’

‘*Jesus,*’ he breathes, for a second impressed, but then he remembers what his dad is— the danger that Mc-whatever woman has put herself in with him. ‘He won’t let her boss him around for long, Neil *hates it* when women tell him what to do.’

The Chief nods. ‘The moment there’s a credible lead I’ll be after him myself, I’ll track him down and drag him back to town, I *promise*. Hell, if this had happened a few months ago I’d be after him right now— and that’s something I feel like maybe I should apologize for. I want you to know that it’s not me slacking off, *none* of us want a man who can do what your dad did to Susan, to Max, to get away with it — but there are no good leads right now and I—’ the guy hesitates.

‘Yeah? You *what?*’

‘I don’t want to leave town on a wild goose chase— You know the things that happen around here, you know how *unpredictable* they can be— I think about leaving El, about leaving *Joyce*— what if something goes down and I’m not there? I mean, last time me and Joyce went off and you all had to deal with that stuff *alone*. They’re my family, I actually have a *family* again—’ the cop trails off, rubbing

one of those massive hands roughly across his face. ‘Jesus. I meant to be talking to *you* about your feelings, not vomiting my own everywhere. This is what happens when you fall in love and she wants to *talk* about stuff and you can’t just say *no*, not when she’s *looking* at you like that—’

‘I get it,’ he says after a moment. ‘Not the— not the *love* stuff—’ though he kind of gets that, too. He’d talk about stuff with Steve that he could never imagine talking about with anyone else— But *Steve doesn’t want him*— ‘I get why you don’t want to leave town. I get wanting to *protect* people—’

‘You’re—’ the Chief clears his throat. ‘You’re a good guy. You know how I told you to prove me wrong? Well you *have*—’ He doesn’t know what to say to that. Makes him *uncomfortable*. After a moment the cop starts talking again, ‘I don’t know, not for sure, that you worry you’re like your dad— I mean, just because I used to worry I was like *mine* when I was younger— no. Not just when I was *younger*. There’s always bad days and bad nights, and when you have a temper it’s always a *struggle*— but you *protected* Max, Susan. You’re *not* your dad, you’re your own man—’

Even though it’s like, the *least* important part of what the cop just said, his mind get stuck on, ‘Your dad was an asshole too?’ Or maybe it’s *because* it’s the least important bit, the bit he has no *feelings* about.

The cop grimaces. Fidgets with his coffee cup for a moment, before getting out his pack of cigarettes and offering him a new one, taking one for himself, lighting them both again with that cheery orange Bic — ‘He wasn’t a wife beater. He’d have probably ripped a hand off before laying it on my mom— but *me*? Anything, *anything* at all I did that he didn’t like, and off would come his belt— I can still hear it. I think about it at all and the noise of it slipping out of his belt loops— and it made me so *angry*, but I thought it was normal, you know. I thought I had it *good*— I did have it good compared to— to— Well. Not my story to tell— but it was just his *belt*, never his fists, and never where I’d have to walk around with everyone *seeing*— but still. It was so *humiliating* and damn I *hate* that man. *Still* hate him. Never came back for his funeral, even though my wife nagged and nagged and *didn’t understand*—’ and suddenly those eyes are fixed on his face and he feels *pinned* in place, ‘You don’t have to forgive people that

hurt you, remember that. People will tell you all kinds of shit about it — but *you don't have to*. Some people don't *deserve* forgiving, and that's ok—'

They fall to silence for a bit. He doesn't know what to say, it doesn't look like the cop knows what to say— but then the Chief is talking anyway, 'I broke down for a bit, after Sarah was born. The first time I held her— and she was screaming her head off, all red and wrinkled — and all of a sudden it wasn't normal, what he'd done. It wasn't *ok* — because no matter what she did I could never see myself taking a belt to her, to my baby— I didn't handle it well. Couldn't talk about it, and my wife, she didn't *push*, she had other stuff on her mind, had just had a baby, and she wasn't *Joyce*, Joyce would have known— and sometimes I wonder if the way I was then, for the first few weeks of Sarah's life, is why it all fell apart *later*. If I somehow ruined everything between us by not being able to be there for her, for *Diane*, at the beginning—'

'What happened to her?' he asks, because he can hear grief and regret and it seems more than just a divorce. He has never met the Chief's ex-wife and daughter in Hawkins.

'*Sarah?*' the Chief asks, and that answers something. Some of it. '*Cancer*. It's what drove me back to Hawkins—'

Jesus. The silence comes back. The Chief looks small and tired and sad and he feels— *is it guilt?* He doesn't know why the man decided to share. Would guess the cop doesn't know either.

After a long, long moment the man makes a low grunt of frustration, 'Well. This all hasn't gone like I expected. What I set out to do was let you know that other people understand, and that it's ok to be angry and sad and have all kinds of—of— *emotions*— and can I stop now? This is *not my strong* point, and even though I am trying to work on it —'

'It's *fine*. You did— you did *good*. Thank you for trying to help,' oh *Jesus* this is so *embarrassing*.

At least that's something they both seem to agree on. Mrs Byers must be a fierce woman, underneath all her niceness, if she can make a

man like the Chief *talk about his feelings*, and not just to her, but to *another guy*.

Eventually the other man says, 'I'll drop you back off at the Harrington house and then go deal with those boys. *Don't* get involved, ok? I need to make it clear to their parents that their kids' behaviour is not ok in Hawkins, and you beating them up is only going to muddy the issue.'

'I can't just let them get away with it,' he complains, and doesn't that just sound like what he's been thinking about his dad? 'Jesus. It's like I can't do *anything* these days. Can't fix anything—my dad, those assholes that went after Robin, and Steve's being *weird*—' and he did not mean to let that last bit slip.

There is a pause, and then the Chief says, very carefully, 'He's seemed a bit quiet these last couple of days. Did something happen?'

He's not about to admit that Steve sucked him off and now seems to be avoiding him— even when they're in the same fucking room. But, 'I don't know. He's just— It's like he's not there most of the time, and I know I've fucked up but I don't know *how*—' great. Just great. He's using the *Chief of Police* as an unwitting relationship counsellor.

Another pause and then the cop says, 'A lot of people they see— they see the house— and the *hair*— and the fucking *BMW*—' the cop turns his head to look at him for a second before turning back to the road, 'They think he's never had a hard day in his life, but that kid— and it's not my place to say anything, so don't *ask*, but, I don't know, *just try to be there for him* or something, ok? Listening's *important*— that's what Joyce says— and that kid has had a harder time of it than most people would believe.'

'What do you mean?' he demands. Again, someone suggesting Steve is anything but happy, and even if Steve doesn't want him he still wants Steve to be *happy*.

'As I said, don't ask *me*,' the Chief reiterates. 'It's up to him if he wants to talk about it—'

And now he worrying about something else. Jesus.

He lets the cop drop him off, even goes back inside when the guy lingers at the end of the driveway like a creep until he does— He finds Steve and Robin in the den, still curled up, now asleep even though some other weird as shit movie is playing.

He looks at them— ok, no, he looks at *Steve*— for a long moment, before making his own way upstairs. If there's something going on, if whatever *hard time* Steve's had is what's getting in between them—

And maybe it's wishful thinking, but wouldn't it be nice if the problem wasn't that *he's* done something, but that something's been done to Steve and that's made him—

But that's a terrible thought, isn't it? That Steve's been secretly hurting and that's why he's pulling away.

If only he could just find the balls to *talk* to the guy—

But, still, what if Steve rejects him? Properly rejects him—

There'd be no coming back from that, would there?

62. Chapter 62

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For slut shaming, the aftermath of Robin's experience of street harassment, the aftermath of domestic violence, please let me know if I missed any, I am tired enough it's likely.

So, I am basically moving right now, and exhausted, and sore from laying flooring, so... Any wit I might have has left the building I am afraid. We're back with Steve- as will be the next chapter. I hope you all enjoy and thank you all so much for reading, for commenting, and for the kudos!

He wakes curled up with Robin on the sofa. She wakes up a moment later. Then it's just— *ow* and *why did we do that?* and *ugh, my neck* from both of them, still in a kind of giggly sympathy instead of as grumpy as he thinks he would be if it was almost anyone else.

She looks a bit better today— the memory of her in the diner, so pale, eyes red, *shaking* against him— He is not going to forget that in a hurry. He is so angry with Dan C. and Jake and above all *Tommy*—

She had admitted, once Billy was gone, that she had insinuated to Tommy that she knew about them, him and Tommy and Carol, and that's what had really set him off— but that doesn't make it ok. *It is not ok.*

He never thought his old— *person*— was the kind of guy to harass innocent girls in the street— but then the graffiti, *Nancy*— and he should never have gone along with it, and he still *hates* himself for it, but he's suddenly cruelly reminded it was *Tommy's* idea.

Tommy could always take things further than him or Carol were comfortable with, it's just— they— Well. They were so *fond* of him they'd let him get away with it.

Robin tells him she should get home, that she didn't even call her

parents and that they'll be worried— but breakfast first. He can give her that at least.

He makes crepes, for himself and Robin and Billy— who comes down looking like *Billy*— so fucking handsome— and that just makes him—

He feels *sick*, like, *all the time now*.

Billy hasn't said anything, or hit him, or anything— but Billy hasn't reached out either, grabbed him, *kissed* him. It's like nothing ever happened— and maybe that's what the blond wants, but it's killing *him*.

Killing him and he feels like such an ass— because Billy is having such a hard time right now, with Max and Susan and Max staying with her dad, he can *see* it in the blond, and there he is, sulking, because Billy regrets letting him suck the guy off.

He and Robin chat a bit over breakfast, Billy brooding, before he goes upstairs to get ready. Showering quick and maybe not putting as much effort into his hair as he could— but no one cares what he looks like, do they? There's no one left he wants to impress.

When he comes down Billy is out by the pool smoking— the scent of the smoke is different. *Marlboros* he realises, and then tries to force down the way that feels like a rejection. He's the one who gave the blond that first pack of Gauloises—

He hesitates for a moment, feeling all sorts of contradictory impulses — the worst being the need to drop himself into the blond's lap and apologize and apologize until everything's ok between them again— but he's out here for a reason. 'My car's still at the hospital,' he begins, feeling out the waters, 'So could you drop me and Robin back there and then I can take her home?'

Blue eyes fix on his face for a moment, before Billy looks away. 'Of course. I want to see Max before I go to work anyway.' It's gruff, but it's not a rejection.

He goes to tell Robin and she pulls him into a hug and says, 'I wish you'd talk to me about whatever it is,' and he nods but he doesn't say

anything.

She is his *best friend* and it's amazing to think she can read him well enough to know when something's wrong when no one else has ever been able to. Still, he can't exactly *admit* to her what happened. If nothing else, she still doesn't like Billy.

—

And she'll think he's an *idiot*.

—

And possibly a slut— *is he a slut?*

He's never had to worry about whether or not he's a slut before.

Is it only people who have sex with guys that have to worry about being sluts?

That all seems kind of *wrong*. And unfair.

He's never really thought of the girls he's been with as sluts— not that he's ever really tried to defend them if anyone else called them that either.

He remembers Nancy and the way she'd tried to insist she wasn't like the other girls he'd been with, and the way *slut* had slipped out of his mouth even though it's not what he thought of them, and the way he could see the agreement in her face and feels—

Weird.

—

Billy is quiet on the ride to the hospital, window open, smoking in silence. Robin glares, but she doesn't say anything, just presses up against his side while they huddle in the back seat.

When they get there Billy takes the effort to park next to his car— and the blond is— it's so— it's *considerate*, he just wishes this invisible wall between them would vanish so he could say that. Still,

he thanks the blond— Robin does too— before they get out of Billy's car and into his.

Robin's house is in the heart of town— not much of a drive— and he can't think of anything to say, so he turns on the radio and they both sing along to *Raspberry Beret* and *Careless Whisper* and *Material Girl* until he pulls up a block away from her house when she asks him to. 'I don't want them to see me getting out of your car and have *questions*,' is her explanation.

He pulls her into a sideways hug over the gearstick and makes her promise to ring him if she needs to talk, before watching her climb out of the beemer and keeping watch until she shuts the front door behind her. Then he pulls away and heads back to the hospital to check on Heather and say hello to Max and Ned.

Max's dad is a weird man. Not a *bad* man, he thinks, but kind of—

He gets the impression the man feels *guilty* about a lot of things and deals with that by chattering a lot and not thinking about it— except if Billy's there, then the man's almost entirely silent. There's some bad blood between them, and he just wishes he could ask, try and *fix* things—

Oh well. It's all *fucked*.

The moment he sunk to his knees between Billy's legs he fucked up his entire world.

Heather is awake long enough for them to have a bit of a conversation, not much of one, but enough he gets the real impression her mind's still all there even if it's going to take a long time for her body to recover. She seems happy to see him again and it reminds him of how much he's always liked her.

Once Heather's dozed off again he talks to Max for a bit, even gets invited in to see Susan— who only has the faintest idea who he is but is sweet enough she doesn't mind his intrusion— and says hello to Ned before heading back into town. He feels like a coffee at the diner — which is just another way of saying he doesn't feel like hanging around at home all alone aside from Richie Lewis—

He has no idea what Billy did to piss the guy off, but the man won't stop going on about the blond— even though he tells Richie that Billy is his friend and is staying because of some family problems— and it is driving him *nuts*.

He sits by the window, drinking the coffee and looking out on the street. There's not many people around- no one he wants to talk to. He needs to get a job, no matter whether or not his dad is reinstating his allowance. He needs something to *do* other than pine over unobtainable blonds and feel bad all the time.

He's become completely *useless* recently.

Maybe he should get a copy of the paper? Not that it's much of a paper right now— but there should still be one or two job postings in it, shouldn't there?

Maybe he could drop in at Melvald's? He could say hello to Mrs Byers while he was getting the paper—

Good idea.

He just wishes that stupid little voice in the back of his head that keeps telling him Billy wants him would shut up. He doesn't understand it— all evidence points to the opposite. It must be hope—

He can remember the kids having some squabbling argument about Pandora's box one time, when he was still with Nancy and they were trying to teach him how to play their nerd game— only Dustin had been calling it something else, hadn't he? Cal—*something*. It means *jar* apparently— and about what *hope* was doing in it.

He can't remember which one of them had decided it was because hope was one of the great evils of the world— mainly because they kept swapping opinions, too busy trying to show each other up with what they know— but maybe they were right.

Part of him *hopes* that Billy wants him, and that hope is *killing him* right now.

Well. There's no point thinking about it. Thinking about it is not helping. He'll go get the paper and see Mrs Byers, Mrs Byers tends to

make him feel better.

He starts off in that general direction, humming *Raspberry Beret* to himself— a flash of dark hair, the familiar way a body moves — *Tommy*.

63. Chapter 63

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for homophobia, fear of homophobia, homophobic violence, violence from somebody who once used to be an intimate partner, slut shaming, ableism, non-consensual kissing- so mild sexual assault, and violence towards minors.

I know this part is short, but it does make sense to break the narrative here, and I really want to know what you all think of this scene- also I'm dithering about posting more a little because I said I'd have something worked out to let you know about my original writing, but I've just been too busy and exhausted to arrange anything, but I still wanted to update the fic. Thank you all for reading, and for the comments and kudos, you're all amazing! Stay safe out there!

He's launched himself across the street and grabbed the guy by the front of his shirt before he realises he's about to move, dragging Tommy into the narrow space between two shops and out of sight. 'You *asshole*,' he snarls in the guy's stunned face. 'What the hell were you doing attacking Robin like that? How could you?!'

A malicious look comes over Tommy's face, 'How could *you* tell your bitch girlfriend about us? You trying to get both our asses beaten? You wanna end up dead in a field somewhere?'

'*Don't* call her that!' he snaps, pushing the dark-haired guy against the brick wall. '*Don't!*'

'A *bitch* is a *bitch*, I call it as I see it,' Tommy snaps, grabbing for his hands to make him let go. What follows is maybe a bit undignified, them both slapping at each other, him insisting Tommy not call Robin a bitch, Tommy calling her a bitch, until the dark-haired guy snaps, 'Jesus Stevie, you've always had shit taste in women.'

‘She is *not* my girlfriend,’ he snarls in the guy’s face, ‘She’s my *friend*. She’s the *best friend* I ever had—’

He’d almost think the other guy looks *hurt*, but whatever hurt is there is quickly swallowed up by that same malicious look as before. ‘Is Hargrove your *boyfriend* then? Is it more than just you sucking his dick?’

‘The fuck are you talking about?’ he blurts out, but it comes out squeaky and he knows Tommy will see through it. *Has* seen through it—

‘I thought— I don’t know what I thought,’ the guy breathes out, ‘But you have, haven’t you? You’ve gotten to your knees for that *prick*— Jesus. You really are a faggot, aren’t you? A faggot and a *slut*, I don’t know what I was thinking, letting you hang around me.’

‘Shut up!’ he hisses, and it sounds wounded, small, *weak*. ‘Just fuck off Tommy—’ he needs to get out of here, this was a mistake— ‘Fuck off and *leave Robin alone*, you won’t have to see me again—’ he starts to push past the guy to leave the alley, but Tommy is suddenly grabbing him.

‘Why couldn’t it be enough for you, huh?’ the guy snarls in his face. ‘Wanting more. Always *more*— We were *safe*, you get that? All of us. Me and Carol and *you*— but then you had to go getting to your knees and making it something *more*. It could never be *more*, this isn’t a world where it can be *more*, it doesn’t work like that. Two guys and a girl— you couldn’t be our *boyfriend* but you’re too dumb to get that, aren’t you? Jesus Stevie, you’ve always needed someone else to do your thinking for you or you come up with the most fucking *stupid* ideas.’

‘Get off me Tommy!’ he grabs at the guy’s hands on him, trying to get free, all too aware that things are the other way around from before and Tommy— He hates it, but physically Tommy’s always been *stronger* than him.

He doesn’t want to hear the words. Doesn’t want to hear that Tommy always thought he was *stupid* even when the other guy was reassuring him that his dad was wrong, that he isn’t really a retard.

‘No!’ is all he hears before the breath is being knocked out of him as he’s pushed roughly against the wall, his reflexive gasp smothered by the mouth that’s suddenly on his. The kiss is rough and biting, the taste of blood on his tongue from the burning line split into his bottom lip. For a moment he has no idea what’s happening, can’t *believe* what’s happening, but—

Tommy is kissing him, pressed full body to him, pressing him into the wall, covering him, kissing—

‘Get off me!’ he tries to say again, but the words are eaten up by the guy’s mouth, the guy’s hands grabbing at him—*Jesus* is this what it’s like for a girl when a guy decides he’s gonna kiss her whether she wants it or not? He tries to push the guy away, but Tommy is too strong—

This is pissing him off—

It feels so familiar, the same as last time, no choice but to punch Tommy in the ribs to get him to stop.

Except it is different, because instead of pulling back and apologizing Tommy lurches back with a roar of pain and the next thing he knows is a starburst going off behind his eyes as his head bounces off the bricks, *pain* blooming around his eye left.

Tommy just punched him.

*Tommy just **punched** him—*

‘Get the hell away from him!’ he hears squawked, a gangly blur suddenly lurching onto the scene and at Tommy, long limbs flailing at the guy, trying to push him away, away—

‘Mike?’ he manages, straightening up, trying not to raise his hand to the pain in his face.

‘You can’t kiss people and then hit them!’ the kid is squawking, still flailing at Tommy, ‘You *can*’t!’

‘I didn’t kiss him!’ Tommy is snarling back. ‘I *didn*’t! You say *anything* to anyone kid and I’ll rip your ugly little head off!’

‘Leave him alone Tommy,’ he tries, sounding weak even to his own ears. This is getting out of control— ‘Mike! Mike! Stop it! Come over here! Jesus, he won’t *say anything* Tommy—’

‘Shut the fuck up *faggot!*’ his old friend snarls at him, ‘No one’s *ever* cared about what you think, and they’re not about to—’ Mike lands a hit to the side of Tommy’s face, the side that— *oh shit. That’s the side Billy broke, isn’t it?*

Tommy raises a hand gingerly, touching his face, eyes wide and *furious*.

Shit.

Before he can get between them the older guy has swatted Mike across the face, sending the gangly kid hard into the wall. The he’s there, there, pushing Tommy back, ‘Don’t you dare, don’t you *dare*—’

‘Why? You sucking his little kiddie pecker too?’ and, ok, wow, the level of contempt in Tommy’s voice is hard to bear, no matter how utterly *furious* he is with the guy right now.

‘Don’t be *disgusting*,’ he hisses, pushing Tommy again.

‘I should teach you both a lesson,’ the dark-haired guy breathes into his face, ‘Beat the *faggot* out of the two of you—’

Ok. That’s *enough*— He lashes out, knowing he’s shit at this but hoping Tommy is close enough that it won’t matter. It doesn’t, his ex-friend going wheeling back, both hands over that same side of his face. The side he just—

He grabs Mike by the arm and drags the kid out of the alley and back out where people can see them, hoping to hell it’ll be enough to stop Tommy from going after them again— even though he knows it wasn’t enough to stop the guy going after Robin yesterday.

‘My bike!’ Mike whines as they scurry past it.

‘Forget it!’ he almost shouts. ‘We can come back for it later, when that psycho isn’t around—’

*He punched Tommy in the face, **Tommy**— Because Tommy hit him.*

Oh God.

They get to the beemer, get the doors open, and the moment they're both inside he locks them, locks Tommy out— but he can't see the dark-haired guy. He can't—

That doesn't mean it's safe though. Hah— *Once he could never imagine anywhere safer than by the other guy's side.*

Goddamn, his life is a *mess*.

He starts up the car and pulls away from the street, heading back to his house, glancing at Mike as he does and *wincing*— kid's going to have a hell of a bruise on the side of his face.

Thankfully no one's home when he gets there, no Richie Lewis, no Will, no Billy— He has no idea how Billy would react if he found out what happened— wow.

Wow.

He may not *literally* be coming apart, but it still feels like his world is.

64. Chapter 64

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: For homophobic language, internalised homophobia, internalised biphobia, the aftermath of Tommy nonconsensually kissing Steve and then hitting him, discussions of domestic violence- please let me know if I missed any.

So, after much thought (and much chaos in my personal life), I'm probably going to start by posting my original fic on AO3- sometime in the next month, but not just yet- and worry about what else to do with it later- also maybe Wattpad, but I've never used Wattpad, so...? Does anyone have an opinion of Wattpad? Anyway, thank you all so much for sticking with this story, especially as updates have been so sporadic recently even though I already have what I'm posting written- (as I said, much, much chaos in my personal life)- and thank you all so much for the comments and kudos! We don't have long to go until Billy and Steve are together now (and, unfortunately, the fic goes on hiatus.) Stay safe out there- Also, welcome one and all to the way too much information about Mike show!

Inside the house Mike follows him to the kitchen, 'Sit!' he orders, going to the freezer and fishing out a couple bags of frozen peas. He hands one to the kid before pressing the other to the bruising coming up on his own face, watching with one eye as the kid does the same, and then they just— sit, for a bit, in silence. It's a weird kind of silence, like he can feel something brewing in it.

It's Mike that breaks it, of course. Mike is *Mike* after all. 'Did you really used to go out with Tommy H. and Carol?'

Well. How's he supposed to answer that?

'Um,' is how he starts, feeling his face scrunch up into what's

probably an ugly grimace. 'It's complicated?' he tries.

'It's just—' the kid hesitates, and he's wondering if Mike's about to say something *horribly* offensive, because that would be exactly the kind of thing Mike would do, but all the kid says is, '—I've never met anyone else that likes *both* before, and more than one *at the same time*—'

For a moment he's wondering if he's going to have to explain bisexuality to the kid— and, honestly, even though he's bisexual himself, he's not sure how qualified he is to— and then the *else* sinks in.

Else.

Oh God, *is Nancy's little brother coming out of the closet to him?*

'Are you saying you think you're *bisexual*?' he squeaks, then winces. Ok. Probably not the best way to handle it— *Accepting, he's got to be accepting—*

'*I don't know!*' the kid wails. 'I don't know and I don't want to talk about it if you *weren't* dating Tommy H. and Carol at the same time —'

Ok. Ok— It seems like Mike needs to talk to someone about this, it also seems like Mike has chosen *him* to be that someone— and even though the kid can be an absolute pain in the ass he's not a bad kid— and *imagine* what it would have been like if *he'd* had someone to talk about all the Tommy/Carol/Nancy/Billy bullshit with—

It's like with Will, isn't it? Him somehow ending up the grown up these kids can talk about this stuff with— and it's only because *he's* like *them*, not because he's any good at it. God. *What if he manages to fuck Mike up?*

This is more responsibility than he wants to deal with right now— but *someone's* got to do it. It's not fair to just leave the kid flailing—

'Yeah, kid, yeah. I was with Tommy and Carol— *before Nancy, ok?* I wasn't cheating on her or anything— only when I was with Tommy and Carol it wasn't a *proper relationship* or anything— I mean. *I*

wanted it to be— but *they* didn't. Do you understand?'

'Why didn't they?' the kid asks.

He feels himself flinch, feels the way he tries to sink down into himself— 'I don't know. I wish I did, believe me, I really— I wish I did.'

'Oh,' the kid says, contemplative, before his expression firms up. 'Well, you can't be with them now anyway, not after Tommy hit you.' He remembers the kid saying something about that before— His lack of immediate response triggers the dark-haired boy to add, 'Mom always told Nancy that she couldn't be with any guy that hit her because he'd hit her *again*, even if he said he wouldn't— and she always told *me* I wasn't to hit girls— and I thought about it— because of *Will*, you know, and it doesn't really work with two boys— because then you can't date, like, *any* guy you've ever had a fight with— so I thought about it a bit more and I think it *does* kind of work if it's like this— Once you've kissed a guy, then if he hits you, you can't be with him anymore. Does that make sense?'

After a moment he nods, 'Yeah. Yeah it does—' It's not a perfect philosophy— if *philosophy* is even the right word— but it does take into account *stupid guy shit* more than just saying you can't be with someone who's ever hit you. Because it probably is a bad idea to stay involved with someone who hits you— It would also mean that as long as Billy never hit him again then being together would be ok— even though Billy once beat the shit out of him— But *Billy doesn't want him like that*.

It's so hard to remember that sometimes. Billy's always been the King of mixed messages.

There's a pause, then Mike says, 'I used to worry about it, Will getting involved with some guy who would hurt him— and I'd tell myself that the sick feeling I'd get if I imagined another boy kissing him was because of that—'

'But it's not?' he ventures after a moment of the kid saying nothing more.

Mike sighs, loud and frustrated. ‘*El* was supposed to fix things. I found *El* and all of a sudden I wanted to kiss *her* and I was— I— I had *feelings* for her, so that meant I couldn’t be a, you know— a—’ the kid’s voice drops to a whisper, ‘a *fag*—’

Wincing a bit at that ugly little word, he asks, ‘But you still want to kiss Will?’ hoping he’s reading this right.

‘*I still want to kiss Will!*’ the boy agrees with a wild flail of long arms, ‘I still want to kiss Will, only I want to kiss *El* too— and I have *feelings* for her— only sometimes I think I have *feelings* for Will too— and I didn’t think you really could want to kiss both a boy and a girl at the same time until today—’

‘When you overheard me and Tommy?’

Mike nods. ‘I thought he was going to beat you up or something— because we all know you’re *terrible* at fighting— so I followed you in case I needed to shout for help.’ Which is *not* a flattering picture of what the kids think of him. But— honestly, he’s not exactly *surprised*. That kind of *stupid guy shit* has never been his strong point— unlike *sports*. He’s always been good at sports— and one successful fight with some random Russian isn’t really going to change that.

‘That’s—’ *what is he supposed to say?* ‘That’s a complicated mess you’re in—’ he tries. Wow. His mental image of Mike Wheeler does not include *bisexual* and in love with two different people. The Wheelers as a family are way too— too— *WASPy* for— for—

‘I know!’ the kid exclaims, ‘I know. And I have *no idea* what to do about it— and now, with Max—’ the kid trails off, glancing at him guiltily.

‘What about Max?’ he asks, not sure he wants to know the answer.

Mike huffs, grimacing at him, before admitting, ‘Well, now I kind of want to kiss *her* too—’

‘Are you saying you’re in love with—’

‘No!’ Mike yelps. ‘No! Not— not *love*. I want to *kiss* her, I don’t have, you know, *those* kinds of feelings for her.’

‘But you do for El and Will?’

An awkward pause and then the kid nods. ‘I’m just— I’m really *confused*, and there’s no one I can talk to about it. No one *at all*— until today, because you must have felt something similar at some point, right?’

‘I guess— but Tommy and Carol were already *Tommy and Carol* the first time I kissed either of them, and otherwise it’s always been *one* person—’ This probably isn’t all that helpful. It seems like the kid is looking for help untangling his feelings as much as anything.

He tries again, ‘So you have feelings for El and Will, and you want to kiss Max— What about Lucas, do you want to kiss him too? And how do you feel about the fact that he’s the one dating Max?’

Mike frowns for a moment, ‘The thought of kissing Lucas isn’t *gross* or anything, I mean— I guess I wouldn’t mind, I don’t really *want* to, but I wouldn’t *mind*—’ a bit more frowning and the kid adds, ‘And I don’t mind that he’s dating Max, or that Max is dating him or anything— it doesn’t bother me. Though—’ more guilt. *Wow, what next?* ‘I mean. I *don’t* like the idea of Max kissing someone who isn’t Lucas— or me, or El, or *Will* I suppose— though I don’t think Will would want to kiss her as she’s a girl.’

‘What about Dustin?’ he asks, even though it’s not remotely necessary he knows. It’s curiosity— absolutely unhelpful curiosity. He is learning way more about Mike Wheeler than he ever expected to.

‘Do I want to kiss him?’ Mike asks, face all scrunched up and obvious the answer’s going to be *no*. ‘*Ew*. No— It’d be like kissing a *brother*.’

After a bit more prodding they work out that Mike doesn’t care who Lucas kisses, but would rather El, Will and Max either kiss *him* or each other— or Lucas, possibly— and *no one else*. ‘So, do you think I’m a sleazebag or a pervert or something? Because it’s *weird*, I know it’s weird. Weird and *selfish* and everyone’s all going to *hate me* if they find out and I can’t even *blame them*,’ and the distress in the boy’s voice shudders through him.

Suddenly he feels terribly sorry for the kid and *angry* with himself for

the way the fact Mike tends to annoy him— and, if he's honest, the way the kid reminds him of *Nancy*— means he hasn't been as *gentle* as he should have been. He hasn't been *mean*, he knows that, but— 'I'm not going to hug you if you don't want to be hugged,' he says, because Mike is the *prickliest* of the kids— and *fragile*, he didn't realise the kid was fragile before— 'But if you need a hug I'm more than willing to give you one—' which is as far as he gets before the kid is flinging himself at him.

He drops the peas to wrap both his arms around the boy, holding on as Mike bursts into tears and begins mumbling almost incoherently. After while he makes out enough to work out that it's about losing Will— or thinking he did and never wanting to again— it's about losing *El*— or thinking he did and never wanting to again— it's about the way he doesn't know if Max even *likes* him, it's about how sometimes he thinks his whole family *hates* him, it's about being a *freak* and growing up and knowing he's *wrong*— and not just in the ways that are obvious— and being so, so, so afraid he's going to end up alone when everyone else finds out exactly how much of a freak he is.

All he can do is hold on and hum, trying to comfort the kid.

Eventually Mike calms down and lets him deposit the boy back into one of the kitchen chairs, scooping up the peas and dumping them back into the freezer— God, he hopes he never has to cook with them. They've been defrosted and refrozen so many times at this point they're bound to be more freezer burn than legume— 'What should I do?' the kid asks, before he can ask the boy if he wants something for lunch.

He freezes. It really is a mess. He thinks of *El*— and everything she's been through. He thinks of Will— and everything he's been through. He thinks of Max— and everything she's been through— and he also thinks of Mike and everything Mike has been through—

'I don't know,' is all he can say. He doesn't know what kind of advice you can give in this situation— *he's* the only other person he's ever met— aside from Tommy and Carol— who have been in a similar situation, and all he knows from experience is failure and pain. 'I wish I could say that it would work out, that you could have *all of*

them and all of you would be happy— But relationships are hard enough with only *two* people.’

‘So you think I’m gross and selfish too?’ the kid asks, mulish resentment coming across his face.

He shakes his head. ‘No. No— If— It wasn’t *my* choice for me and Tommy and Carol to fall apart. I think *I* could have been happy, really happy, with the two of them— but that’s not what *they* wanted and in the end—’ for a split second he hesitates, because Mike is still *Mike* and Mike Wheeler isn’t exactly the kind of person he regularly imagines being *vulnerable* in front of, but— ‘— in the end *I* got hurt, and I don’t want *you* to get hurt any more than I want *El and Will and Max or anyone* to get hurt. So it’s probably best if you’re careful— because this is the kind of situation where getting hurt is far too easy — but that doesn’t mean I think you’re gross for liking boys and girls or even for being able to like more than one person at the same time — and it’s not like you want to keep every one of them just to yourself, is it? As you said, you don’t mind if they kiss each other— it’s just— It’s *love*, isn’t it? But just a bit *different* than the way most people are, and different isn’t necessarily *bad*—’ and that’s about all he’s got. He is still *way* out of his depth. He is just not cut out to be a bunch of kids’— *queer?*— mentor.

Mike thinks about it for a while, an unsatisfied look on his face, but eventually nods— even though he knows, he can just *tell*, that the kid had hoped for something else. Maybe even a part of the boy had hoped that he’d tell him to go for it, pursue them all— but the kid is smart enough to be able to work out that people really could get hurt — even if *he’d* not said anything. ‘Can I talk to you about it, if I need to? Even if you think— and you’re right, I guess. It wouldn’t work—’

‘It’s not that I *don’t want it to*—’ he says, because, while on one hand almost all of the kids making cow-eyes at each other all the time does sound pretty *horrific* to be around, if they were all happy that wouldn’t matter. It’d be almost cute— in a *gross* kind of way.

‘But we could all get *hurt*,’ the kid reiterates. He nods. *Yes*— it could all end in people getting kissed and then punched in alley ways.

65. Chapter 65

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNINGS: Really only to references to what Tommy H. did to Steve, as well as what he and his horrible friends did to Robin in the street. Please let me know if I missed any.

I know I kind of disappeared. I'm sorry. A bunch of stuff has been happening, and I got distracted trying to work on an original story, as well as by Peakylinders. On the plus side I have enough written of the original story I've decided to start posting it here, on AO3 (I should also let you know that I have another profile on this site (NotActuallyaSpider) which is also attached to the fic). I'm also going to add a note at the end of this chapter in case anyone who might be interested has skipped over this particular note. There's not much of this one left to post before this fic goes on hiatus, Billy and Steve really are almost together. It's been a wild ride, hasn't it? Thank you all for sticking with it so far, and for the comments and kudos! Stay safe out there!

Mike falls silent after that, at least until he offers to make the kid a sandwich— which then devolves into pleas for cookies as well or cake or *anything he's been baking, anything at all*. So he makes the kid a sandwich and gets out the choc-chip cookies he baked while he was making Billy's dinner the other night— before going to the Wheeler house for D&D and Billy avoidance.

'Is Billy your boyfriend?' Mike asks as he's setting the plate on the table in front of the kid. He drops it that last inch, staring at the boy.

'No! What?! *Why?!*'

Mike shrugs. 'He acts like he's your boyfriend.'

'Does he?' he asks, voice weak, before deciding he doesn't want to

know the answer to that. ‘Well he’s *not*— and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t— look. Kid. Can you promise not to tell him— or *anyone*— about what happened today? About Tommy and about the things I told you— you can talk about your own stuff, if you want, I just— It’s *private*.’

Mike frowns, ‘Doesn’t Billy know you were with Tommy H. and Carol?’

‘He doesn’t *care*, kid. He is *not* my boyfriend and he doesn’t— he doesn’t *care*—’ Wow. That ended *weak*. Weak and *sad*.

Mike *looks* at him for a long moment before nodding, expression unreadable. He’s thinking that the kid is going to be difficult, that he’s going to have to spend *ages* trying to convince the boy that Billy isn’t *his*— all the while breaking his own heart— but that’s the last of it. Instead Mike starts chattering at him about what the kids have been up to— and how *wrong* everyone is about this or that— and soon it becomes clear the kid has decided he’s hanging out here today.

Why?

Then the kid asks him to teach him how to bake cookies— *What?* ‘For El,’ the boy whines, ‘And Will— and Max— and— *everyone* really likes your cookies, ok? And I thought it would be nice if I could make them too—’

Which is how he ends up spending most of his afternoon trying to teach Mike how to bake cookies— *trying*— by the end of it they’re edible, but the kid’s got some magic power that turns them salty or pasty or rubbery or *burnt* even when he’s watching absolutely *everything* the kid is doing.

It’s at least a distraction— especially since he discovered a message from Robin on his answering machine before he got started with the cookie lesson of eternal frustration— She’s *grounded*. Her parents found out about Tommy and his cronies— and they’re not angry with her about *that*, but about not telling them and then vanishing until the next morning— So. *Grounded*. For a week— and she only managed to get to the phone to ring him because her mom went to

help the neighbour get his cat out from under his porch again, because grounded apparently also means *no phone*.

No Robin. For a *week*—

So. Yeah. The world's most frustrating cookie baking lesson at least keeps his mind off that— and everything else. Robin being attacked. Tommy. *Billy*—

Even once they're finished with the cookies— the final batch parcelled up so Mike can give them to his mom and hopefully impress her— the kid still won't leave. Setting up camp in the den, in front of the TV, and expecting him to come and watch whatever movie the kid is so enthralled in.

By the time Billy gets home he feels a bit like he's going insane. Mike is very— *intense*— and this is the most one on one Mike time he's ever experienced.

It's kind of pathetic— the sound of Billy's car pulling in has him sitting up, listening, listening— and then the key in the lock, his head automatically turned to face the hall as he waits— footsteps thumping, sounding *tired*, and there the blond is in the doorway, *looking* at him with those blue eyes—

'*What the fuck happened to your face?!*' Billy demands, storming into the room and reaching for him— and he flinches, but Billy keeps coming, reaching out, cupping the side of his face oh-so-gently.

Oh.

It's like he's forgotten how to speak. He tries to say *something*, make some excuse, say *anything* other than what actually happened— but instead of words escaping him he's almost *swooning* into the blond's grip. Wow. Billy is being so *gentle*—

Also, wow, Billy is so *close*.

'Did someone *hit* you?' the blond hisses, blue eyes narrow and hot with rage.

'Uh,' he manages.

There's an ugly snorting noise from the side, both of their attention suddenly snapping to Mike— who looks back at them with large, innocent eyes. 'What the fuck is shitty Wheeler doing here?' Billy asks, still not removing that large, *strong*, hand from his face.

'We ran into each other,' Mike says.

Billy glares at the kid, eyes roving over the bruise coming out on the boy's face. 'If you're saying you hit Steve with your *shitty bike*—' it's possibly the most threatening tone he's ever heard from someone that's not a Russian that's just had him beaten up. Or his dad, in a *mood*.

Mike shrugs, trying to appear unruffled— though he does notice the tiny step backwards the dark-haired boy takes. 'It's been fun,' the kid says, out of nowhere, 'But I need to get home for dinner— And my *bike*, I can't just leave it in the middle of town—'

He sighs, 'Ok then,' then glances back at Billy. Any second now the blond will stop touching him— any— *oh*. He's going to have to do it himself, he steps away from the blond, unable to meet those blue eyes as that *manly* hand falls away from his face, a tiny glance up and Billy looks *thoughtful*, but what that means? 'I'll just drop him back home then come back and make dinner?'

Billy opens his mouth to say something, but Mike talks over him, 'Billy can take me.'

'What?!' he squawks at the same time as the blond in question says, 'I don't fucking think so.'

'Hear me out,' the kid says, placating, 'Billy can take me to get my bike, then take me home, while Steve gets started on dinner— that way it won't be so long before you're both eating— because you look hungry?' that's addressed at Billy, 'And, um, Steve's food is really— good?'

He glances at Billy— to find the blond squinting at Mike— but when he shifts his gaze the kid isn't doing anything other than being *Mike*, so—?

‘Sure. Fine. *Whatever*,’ Billy spits out, then, ‘Hurry up kid. This isn’t a long-lasting offer.’

Mike blurts something like, ‘Seeya Steve, it was fun, I’ll come back soon,’ and lurches towards the blond.

‘*Cookies!*’ he reminds Mike, making the kid flail and change direction towards the kitchen— leaving him and Billy in a moment of silent awkwardness— before the kid flaps back into the house and he and Billy leave in a cloud of irritation and gangly limbs.

What?

Ugh. *Whatever*. He’ll do what the kid suggested and get started on dinner— he’s making meatloaf, because he really needs to go to the shops at this point, especially since Mike used up almost all of his flour and butter earlier— and try not to imagine what it’ll be like later. Him and Billy, sitting in silence across the kitchen table.

Notes for the Chapter:

If anyone's interested I have the first part of an original work posted to my account(s) (I am both runrarebit and NotActuallyaSpider) if any of you want to check it out. You don't have to, of course, and even if you do and don't like it, that's fine. I just wanted to let people know in case they were interested. For convenience the link is [Away](#).

66. Chapter 66

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: for mention of Tommy nonconsensually kissing Steve and then hitting him, for mentions of street harassment, for disclosures without asking the permission of the character being disclosed about, mentions of homophobia, for jealousy and poor emotional regulation, please let me know if I missed any.

So I finally got myself together enough to actually post this. This is the last part of this fic I have written and it is not officially on Hiatus- though I've decided to go on hiatus for all fanfic writing for now, as I really do want to focus on getting some original stuff done, and I know from experience that I tend to make excuses to write fanfic instead if I let myself. So, yes, hiatus. I'm not sure when, or if, I will be back, but I do want to say, before I go, how much I really, really appreciate you all! Thank you, all of you for reading, and thank your for the comments and kudos! I hope where I've chosen to leave this is at least a little satisfying. Stay safe out there!

It's been a long, shitty day. Waking up to that— almost *bruised* air around Robin and Steve— especially *Robin*, and having to drop them off at the hospital without even being able to do anything about anything.

He saw Max, he saw Ned, he saw Susan, he saw Sinclair never two steps away from Max like the clingiest of clingy boyfriends, which is always kind of embarrassing, but at least the kid brought El and little Byers.

He wonders how Max can stand it, all day in the hospital, waiting for her mom to be well enough to leave.

She did say her dad and her were going to be looking at some places

to rent or buy later, which is why he came straight home instead of seeing her after work.

Fucking *work*— Everyone deciding to add gossiping about Robin to all the gossiping about *him* they're still doing— They're all fucking lucky Adam was there— and the dark-haired guy must be getting sick of running interference by now.

The one good moment was getting to see Karen, come to take that little blonde kid of hers swimming— she no longer flirts with him, which is kind of sad, but she does *smile*, if a little awkwardly, when their eyes meet— absolutely lose her shit and lay into a bunch of her friends who were speculating about what Robin could have done to make those boys treat her like that. It was *glorious* to see the woman stand up and snap and snarl about how *nothing* any girl could do could ever justify the behaviour of a bunch of pathetic little *boys* that think harassing girls in the street somehow makes them *men*.

Yeah. That had definitely been the highlight of his day— and then he came home to a Steve that looks like someone has fucking *punched him*—

If it was the Wheeler kid being reckless—

But. But he doesn't quite buy it, and he doesn't trust that he'll be able to get the story out of Steve with the kid still hanging around.

The kid's got a bruised face too, and even though the only reason he actually agreed to take the kid home was because the little shit was making all those weird gestures when Steve wasn't looking— and he's still wondering *what the fuck the kid wants to tell him*— it does occur to him that he could probably get the story from the shitty boy easier than Steve. Steve can be—

He's starting to get the impression that Steve is much more secretive than anyone would guess.

Anyway, chances are the kid wants to tell him the story anyway, because what the fuck else could shitty Wheeler want to talk about?

He glances at the boy, 'So, this bike of yours?'

‘It’s in the centre of town, I’ll show you where when we get there,’ is what the kid says, and then, with barely a pause, ‘Steve said you weren’t his boyfriend but I don’t believe him. I mean, I’m not stupid, I have *eyes*—’

He chokes on a lungful of smoke, snatching his cigarette from between his lips and butting it out harshly in his baby’s ashtray, ‘*What?!*’

The kid is still talking, ‘And then he said you wouldn’t care about Tommy H. hurting him, and that’s *bullshit*, isn’t it? I mean— it’s obvious he needs someone to take care of him, and it’s equally obvious that you want to— and he didn’t want me to say anything, but if I don’t *he’s* not going to, and that douchebag is going to get away with it—’

Get away with what? ‘Ok, kid, I need you to start at the beginning,’ he snaps, fishing for his pack of cigarettes and lighting a new one, even though he just wasted half the last one. He gets the feeling he’ll need the soothing burn of nicotine to deal with whatever this is.

His hands are shaking. *Why are his hands shaking?*

The Wheeler boy squints at him for a moment, ‘Do you know about him and Tommy H. and Carol? Because I’m betting you *don’t*.’

‘Know *what?*’ he manages, but things are— it’s like— Little things he’s noticed, dismissed, bubbling up— his head feels *full*.

The boy has the nerve to nod, like he’s so *wise*— ‘Steve used to go out with them, or something, I’m not entirely sure, because he did say it wasn’t *proper* relationship— it was *something* though—’

From somewhere very far away he feels his hands clench on the steering wheel, feels it *creak*— Tommy H. Tommy H has *touched* Steve—

Hah. He was *right*, at one time at least there was a guy hanging around the brunet, *using* him—

‘How do you know all this,’ he grits out, feeling barely human, surprised his body isn’t burning, isn’t coming apart—

The kid tells him about seeing Steve go for Tommy— *Robin*, his mind supplies— about following the two of them in case Tommy beat Steve up, about the conversation between Tommy and Steve— Tommy and Carol and *Steve*— about Tommy being mean, *cruel*, and Steve trying to get away from him, then Tommy *kissing* him, about watching Steve struggle to get the guy off him, and how Mike had wondered if he should step in, help Steve, but then Steve hit Tommy in the ribs—*not to hurt him*, is what the kid says, *or at least it didn't look like that. It looked like Steve didn't know what else to do because Tommy wouldn't stop*— and then the way Tommy hauled off and hit Steve across the face as hard as he could—

Tommy H. hit Steve—

He listens, not sure how he's staying calm, while the kid talks about getting between them, trying to protect Steve, about getting hit, about Steve punching Tommy— *Steve punched Tommy*— about Steve getting them out of there—

And then, the kid is telling him, *again*, that Steve doesn't think he'd care if Steve got hurt—

'There's my bike!' the kid squawks, bringing him back to the moment. He pulls up and gets out, helping the kid shove the bicycle into the back seat with way less concern than he'd usually feel about the whole business. He barely feels *here*—

On the way to the Wheeler house he asks the kid why he cares what happens to Steve— He doesn't ask the kid why he's so fucking blasé about some gay/straight threeway Steve was apparently involved in. *Bisexual*, a bisexual threeway. That's something he does not need to know in case asking the question pops whatever delusional bubble the kid is living in and the boy ends up grossed out and telling the whole fucking *town*. If he has to beat the shit out of everyone in Hawkins to keep Steve safe—

After an awkward kind of moment the kid says, 'Don't tell anyone, but Steve's *nice*. He's like, way nicer to me than almost *anyone*— and — his cooking is good? and— I don't know. When he and Nancy got together I wondered what was wrong with her, wanting to be with *Steve Harrington*, but these days it feels like *Steve Harrington* has more

time for me than *she* does— and it's not *fair* if Tommy H. gets away with hurting him—' which leads to a reiteration of the kid's belief that once you've kissed someone you're not allowed to hit them anymore.

'So what do you want me to do about it?' he asks as they turn into the kid's street.

The kid gives him an incredulous look, 'Oh, I dunno, I was telling Steve's violent psycho boyfriend he was hurt by Tommy H. because I wanted you to invite the guy around for a tea party— *what do you think I want you to do about it?*'

'You actually want me to go beat the guy up?' he almost laughs. People have been spending way too much time discouraging him from violence recently, and now this kid he really doesn't like is all *go for it*.

The kid shrugs, 'I guess. I don't want him to get away with it, and I really don't want him to think he can just go around kissing and hitting Steve whenever he wants to.'

He pulls up outside the Wheeler house, looking at the bright, cheery lights within, before turning to the kid. 'Ok, well. *Leave it to me.*'

Wheeler Jr. nods, then hesitates— 'You're not going to *hurt Steve* or anything, are you? Out of jealousy— because I only told you because you've been *better*, but if you beat him up or hit him or anything I'm going to—'

'I'm not going to *hurt him!*' he snarls, offended.

'Good,' is all the kid says, before getting out of the car. He follows a moment later to help the kid get the bike out without hurting his baby, then waits and watches until the kid is inside.

—

He flicks his cigarette butt out the window and lights a new one, lingering—

Eventually he pulls away from the curb and heads back to the

Harrington house—

His head feels empty— or maybe so full he can't make out any individual thoughts.

He parks. Gets out of the car. Stands looking up at the Harrington house while he finishes his cigarette, before flicking the butt into the gutter—

Up the path. Up the stairs. Letting himself in. Down the hall toward the kitchen—

Steve.

He's so Goddamn gorgeous— and he thinks about Tommy H. *touching* him, and he thinks about Steve pulling away from him, and he thinks about everything Mike said, and he wonders if Steve is like this because of how badly Tommy hurt him, and he means to open his mouth and ask, and be gentle, and maybe untangle it all so it's all ok, but behind all his good intensions the *rage* and *jealousy* and *misery* of the last few days rises, rises, and what comes out is, 'You let *Tommy fucking H.* touch you but you treat me like a fucking leper?'

'What?' Steve manages, sounding weak, the bowl he was destringing beans into skittering across the counter as he knocks it.

'It makes so much Goddamn sense,' he finds himself snarling, part of him shouting *no, no, no, stop it*, at the back of his head. 'He's so fucking *weird* about you. Pissing in a circle around you, then lashing out at anyone that even *suggests* he feels anything other than complete hatred for you—'

'Mike told you,' Steve whispers, skittering back away from the counter and staring at him, eyes *wide*.

'Yeah, the kid did. He seems to think I'm your *boyfriend*.'

Steve's mouth open, closes, opens— 'Sorry,' slips out, a tiny squeak of sound.

'Why are you *sorry*?!' he roars. He doesn't get it. He doesn't— If Steve could *ever* want something like *Tommy H* why can't the guy want *him*?

Steve skitters backwards, away from him— and it *infuriates him*. Scared of him. Steve is *scared of him*. **Again**, a little voice whispers in the back of his head.

—

Ah. His face is *burning*.

‘Did you suck *Tommy’s* dick too, is that why he wants to hurt you so bad?’ *Jesus Hargrove* **stop it**.

‘I can’t do this, I can’t do this—’ Steve is mewling, arms coming up and wrapping around himself. He wants to reach out. He wants to pull Steve into his arm— *Steve doesn’t want him to touch him—*

It *hurts*.

‘I don’t get it, the way you *look* at me—’ his voice is a rough, ugly thing to his own ears. He sounds like a monster. He sounds like *Neil*. Mocking— he needs to stop. Needs to— ‘I thought you wanted *me*. I thought— was it just that you missed *him*? Was my dick just a substitute for *his*?’

‘I— I’ll ring Mrs Byers, see if you can stay there—’ the brunet says, voice wavering, moving shakily towards the phone.

He gets in the way, hating the way Steve flinches back. ‘You’re not getting rid of me that easily.’ Jesus. He sounds so much like *Neil*.

If he loses it and hurts Steve he’ll—

‘I can’t— Billy, *please*, I— I— I think we should spend some time apart. I just— I **can’t**—’ the brunet— the brunet *whimpers*.

Whimpers.

He’s made Steve *whimper*— It’s ruined. Everything is *ruined*. Why can’t he just *stop*, why can’t he be *sweet*? After this, when it’s all done, when Steve tells him he can’t bear to be around him, he’ll pack up his baby and hit the road. Max will be ok without him— Still, the words, ‘Can’t *what*?’ escape, an agonised snarl.

Steve looks at him, brown eyes large and pained and— the brunet takes a deep breath, straightens up, looks him in the eye. ‘You’re *straight* Billy,’ the brunet says. *Wait, what?* But Steve is still talking, ‘I have feelings for you that you can’t return, and it’s not *fair*. Not fair to you, not fair to me— and I know I shouldn’t have done what I did — and I’m so *sorry*, I never meant to *ruin* everything— but I can’t do this. It’s *killing* me to be so near you and not being able to have you as mine—’

Hurt flashes across Steve’s face. The brunet’s expression shutters off. The brunet turns to go—

Oh. He’s laughing.

‘No!’ he yelps, reaching out and grabbing Steve’s arm, ignoring the anger in the brunet’s face, the way the brunet swats at him, tells him to *let go*. ‘No. Stevie. *No*— You think it’s killing you? It’s killing *me*—’

The fight seeps away from the brunet, Steve staring at him, eyes wide. ‘What?’

Another chuckle escapes him, and he can’t help it. It’s just so *stupid*. ‘I’m in love with you,’ he splutters out, feeling the weight starting to ease.

‘But I’m a guy!’ Steve blurts out. ‘You like girls. Your bedroom is, like, a *shrine* to how much you like girls—’

Ah. The titty posters— ‘I ripped a hole in the wall and had to cover it with *something*,’ he says with a rueful shrug. Then, more serious, because he needs Steve to know this, ‘I am *not* straight. I promise you. I am well and truly *bisexual*—’

‘Oh,’ Steve’s eyes are wide, lips coral-pink and bitten— *and there’s a split in the bottom one and he wants to*— ‘Oh.’ Suddenly the brunet looks *angry*. What? ‘Wait— You *love me*? How can you love me? You ignored me for almost three weeks!’

He flinches. Yeah. *That was a dick move*. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says, and it feels *good* to say it. ‘I’m— I didn’t realise I was bisexual, but then I was looking at you and I— You’re *gorgeous*, and so sweet, and— I

mean. I kind of freaked out. Needed time to get my head on straight —,

Steve nods, but there's a bitter twist to that pretty mouth, and after a moment the brunet says, 'It *hurt*. You ignoring me—'

'Yeah—' he reaches out, pulls the brunet into his arms, and *Steve lets him*. 'I am so fucking sorry. I'm a selfish ass.'

The brunet snorts out a laugh, 'Yeah. You kind of *are*—' a touch of hesitation, 'Are you *sure* though? You're not confused or something? Lonely? Lacking in female company? I know we've been spending a lot of time together— before you started avoiding me, at least.'

He winces. Yeah— it may take a while before Steve forgives him for that one. 'I'm *sure*,' he says, hoping Steve will believe him. 'I realised — Well. You're not the first guy I've thought was hot and not realised at the time— but—'

Steve looks into his eyes, and their faces are so *close*, and he could just— 'But?' the brunet breathes.

'It's fucking soppy as shit, but compared to *you*—' he could just— *Jesus*, his dick is getting hard— 'They're *nothing*. God, Stevie, you're fucking gorgeous, *sex on legs*, and you treat me better than anyone's ever treated me—' he feels a little like he's going insane with *want*, which may be why the last stupid bit slips out, '— and I bought you an icecream machine and I love you and I'd marry you if I could—'

Then Steve is kissing him. Steve is *kissing him*. Kissing him even though he was just ridiculous— Well, if ridiculous is what does it for the brunet—

He surges against Steve, deepening the kiss, feeling Steve's stubble rub against his facial hair, hands wandering, cupping the brunet's face, then smoothing down that long back to curve around his waist — trying to worm their way under Steve's t-shirt. *Fuck, he can't get close enough.*

Steve makes a guttural little noise, *wanting*, hands going up to tangle in his own, blond, hair, and that's it— he surges against Steve again,

hands tightening around the brunet's waist, and bears him up and onto the countertop so he can squirm in between those thighs and rub his own hard dick against that— *Jesus. It's huge*— other hard dick.

'Sex on legs, I told you,' he breathes against Steve's coral lips.

The brunet snorts out a laugh, 'Don't be stupid.'

'I'm not being *stupid*,' he declares, mildly offended that Steve can't see how sexy he is. 'You are the *hottest* thing I've ever seen. I have no idea how I'm gonna be able to keep my hands off you for even five minutes from now on.'

The brunet pulls back a little, examining him, then a nervous little smile crosses that pretty face, 'Does this mean you *are* my boyfriend?'

'Of course I'm your fucking *boyfriend*,' he snaps. 'You're *mine*. Anyone else ever tries to touch you like this and I'll rip their fucking hands off—'

Steve blinks, 'Oh wow, that should not be so hot—'

He feels a purr of satisfaction escape him at the words, before a tiny twinge of insecurity makes him look at Steve seriously, 'You're ok with this, right? Being *boyfriends*? You and me, *exclusive*?'

'Am I—?' the brunet stares at him, incredulous. 'Of course I am. I— Billy— I— I *want this, so much*, oh my God, I don't think I've got the words to tell you how much I want this. I have been *pinning*, like an *idiot*, when it turns out all I had to do was actually *talk to you* about it —'

Ok. Enough talking, more kissing. Steve grunts as he lurches forward and takes the brunet's mouth again, before letting out a pleased little sound and wrapping those arms around him again. Fuck. Steve is a good kisser—

He gets a hand under the other guy's t-shirt, fingers running across the smooth, warm skin of the brunet's lower back, before bringing it around to the guy's belly. Feeling the way his *boyfriend* quivers at the touch. His fingers rake through wiry hair as he shifts his touch up, up

— Amy's words echoing in his head. *Nipples*— His ring finger brushes a hard little nub and Steve jerks in his arms, choked moan escaping between their lips. *Jackpot*.

He rubs his thumb across the little bud, thrilling at the way the brunet reacts, legs coming up and wrapping around him, dragging him in close, Steve shivering every time he brushes that tiny point of flesh. He risks a pinch— not too hard, because Steve seems so *sensitive*, and the brunet pulls away to mewl, 'Fuck, *Billy*—' hips jumping up against his.

Jesus, he is going to chafe the skin off his dick the way this is going and he doesn't even *care*.

There's a long neck presented to him, brown hair just brushing it— he buries his face there, kissing, sucking, biting— gentle. So careful— he knows what his teeth can be when he's not *him*— and squeezes Steve's pec, rubbing at that nipple with his index finger at the same time. Steve makes a weird, choked noise and jerks in his arms, grabbing at him—

Oh.

Oh.

Steve just came—

The thought burns through him, burns all other thoughts away. His hips grind forward mindlessly, chasing, chasing— he *comes*.

—

After they kiss for a bit, slow and sloppy, Steve still sitting on the counter— until the smell of meatloaf cooking makes both their stomachs rumble.

They have to separate then, at least for the terrible time it takes for them to both go change out of their sodden jeans and into sweatpants and for Steve to put their cum smeared clothes in the washing.

Then it's back to the kitchen, Steve back to preparing beans and carrots— made a bit harder by the way he wraps himself around for

brunet from behind, humping him lazily when the urge strikes, nuzzling his face against Steve's neck and occasionally sucking another hicky onto that expanse of unacceptably unmarked flesh.

Steve is his. Steve is his—

Instead of sitting across from each other to eat Steve's excellent meatloaf he takes the seat next to the brunet and pulls it in close, until they're bumping elbows and getting in each other's way and— He is happy. Fucking *blissful*—

After dinner they try to watch something on the TV, curled up in the den— but Steve's just *there*— and he's not even sure what they settled on because all he can do is *touch*. It starts with kissing— and, honestly, his only plans are a bit of making out on the sofa before they take it to bed— but he can see the bulge of the brunet's dick, hard in those thin sweatpants, and it's so easy to reach out and cup it in his palm.

Big. That is a big dick—

Steve's hips jump underneath his touch, the brunet moaning, '*Billy—*' as the guy's hands clench in his curls. His hips lurch forward— *oh, that feels good—*

Steve's not a light guy, but it's so easy to grab for him, to pull at him, to get the brunet sitting straddled his lap— His dick brushes against Steve, the brunet's brushing against him— not quite lining up— and it's animal, it's *instinct*, that has him shifting his grip on the brunet at the same time as Steve squirms in his lap until— *until—*

He thrusts up as Steve grinds down, pleasure sparking up his spine. '*Fucking, drive me wild,*' he grits out, groping at the other guy's ass, trying to pull him closer. Thank fuck for sweatpants. A kiss, rough and wet, but he wants— '*Get your t-shirt off.*' Amy gave him a cheat sheet for Steve's body, no way he's not exploiting it.

Anyway, he wants to see *more*, touch more, taste more, have it all—

'In a bit,' the brunet moans, which annoys him until he feels Steve fumbling with the front of his sweatpants, knobbly fingers a wicked

tease. 'God Billy, get your dick out. I want to touch it.'

'Fuck, yeah,' he groans, scrabbling with the front of his pants, before the thought— 'You too baby.'

He feels Steve tense a bit— but that's probably just anticipation— before the brunet's shaking hands go for his own sweats. It's a bit awkward and Steve almost falls off his lap— until he gets an arm around the brunet to stabilise him— but then— *then*—

Holy hell. *Big* is right— his own isn't exactly *small*, but when hard Steve is *pornstar* big. *Big* pornstar big. Bigger than any dick he's ever seen in real life before— 'Jesus, *look at you*,' he breathes, hips lurching up, so his own smaller, pinker dick presses into its underside. 'So fucking *sexy*.'

Goddamn, look at how small his own dick looks next to it—

All his, all his, no one else gets to touch—

In the back of his mind he's vaguely aware that Steve's massive dick should be making him feel insecure about his own instead of turned on until it feels like he's head's about to pop— but *fuck that*— Jesus, his boyfriend really is so fucking *sexy*. ***So fucking sexy***.

'You don't mind?' Steve's voice is small, a little frown on that pretty face—

What? 'Why the hell would I mind?'

Steve grimaces at him, 'I mean. I know I'm *big*— and not in, like, a braggy way either. Some of the girls I've been with have been a bit—'

'*Fuck them*,' he hisses, then, 'Actually, no. *Do not fuck them*. Never fuck them ever again— Stevie, baby, you are fucking *perfect*—'

Then Steve is kissing him, hands tangled around his head, body surging against his like the brunet is trying to climb into his skin. He pushes up against that sexy body, hips thrusting, his own hands drifting down his boyfriend's back, squeezing, groping, their dicks rubbing together in an imperfect rhythm.

He gets a hand between them, under Steve's top, goes for a nipple— The brunet shudders, whining against his ear— and he's feeling brave — or maybe it's just that Steve drives him wild— because he pulls that hand away and brings it down between them, fingers brushing the slick, silkiness of the head of Steve's dick.

Jesus—

He rubs his palm across it, Steve shuddering in his arms— It really is fucking *huge*, a solid weight in his hand as he strokes down then pulls up—

Steve gasps, hips jumping, and he feels a burst of *wet*, and he strokes again and— 'God, Billy,' his boyfriend comes apart in his arms, cum spurting, spurting— and it's hot and it's wet and his own hips jump up, smearing it between them, *grinding* into the mess, and—

—

He keeps hold of Steve in the comedown, kissing, kissing, kissing—

—

The benefit of being a monster is that he can pick Steve up off the couch, ignoring the way the guy yelps, and carry him off upstairs like some conquering barbarian from the kids' nerd shit. Another benefit of being a monster is apparently Steve really *appreciates* being picked up and carted around—

Though being halfway up the stairs and Steve murmuring, 'I really want to suck your dick again,' in his ear is a good way to almost drop the brunet back down them.

Still, he manages, he gets them up the stairs, gets them into Steve's room, gets Steve on the bed, before they both get naked—

Jesus Steve is— Well. *Sexy* is redundant at this point. But he *is*—

He covers the brunet with his body, nuzzling his face into the guy's chest hair so he can mouth at a nipple—

This really must be *paradise*.

And maybe it won't last, and maybe it doesn't make all the bad shit that's happened go away, and maybe he's still going to have to ask Steve about Tommy H. and Carol— but that's for later. He is not ruining this right now. Not right now—